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**Russian World, Pan-Turkism and EU Normative Power in Gagauz Yeri:
Competing Geopolitical Ideologies and Regional Identity at the Sub-state
Level**

MA Thesis

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Author's Declaration

This Master's thesis is a product of my independent work and efforts. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used in this paper have been properly referenced.

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Russian World, Pan-Turkism and EU Normative Power in Gagauz Yeri: Competing Geopolitical Ideologies and Regional Identity at the Sub-state Level

Rusif Huseynov

Abstract

The current state of Gagauzia, a territorial autonomy within Moldova since the 1990s, reflects its troubled historical past and geographical location. Located at the crossroads of geopolitical interests, Gagauzia even today is subject to geopolitical influence of various power sources, as the interests of Turkey, Russia and the European Union converge in the region. This competition can be best reflected as a struggle of geopolitical ideologies emitted by Turkey (Pan-Turkism), Russia (Russian world) and the European Union (EU normative power), which are certainly interested in either shaping their international *milieu* or bringing the adjacent regions into their sphere of influence.

The major aim of this research is to find out the post-2014 elitar narrative in Gagauzia toward each geopolitical ideology. The relevant Self and Other narrative of Gagauz political, cultural and intellectual figures shapes not only contemporary Gagauz identity, but also which region(s) they belong to, which geopolitical civilization(s) they feel ascribed to, which external actors are constructed as their closest allies and enemies and where they see their future.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research object

Gagauzia or *Gagauz Yeri* in the local language is a small autonomous region in southern Moldova. Established in its present form in 1995 and formally known as the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, the entity covers 1,832 km² and is divided into three *dolays* (districts) in four enclaves. Out of 155,600, which make up 4.6% of Moldova's population, the Gagauz constitute the absolute majority (82.1%) and are followed by Bulgarians, Moldovans, Russians, Ukrainians¹.

Orthodox Christians by faith and Oghuz Turks by language, the titular ethnic group of the autonomy, the Gagauz, migrated to the present-day Moldova and Ukraine in the late 18th century and early 19th century. Since then the core group has lived under the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Romania, the Soviet Union and the Republic of Moldova.

Decades of Russification and Sovietisation, the weak development of the Gagauz language and the multi-ethnic nature of Bessarabia have all contributed to the construction of the Gagauz identity. Underdeveloped during the Soviet time, Gagauz national consciousness, nevertheless, underwent an awakening at the close of the 1980s and claimed a separate ethno-territorial entity.

Unlike other ethno-territorial problems that broke out as violent and bloody conflicts with the fall of the Soviet Union, the Gagauz movement for self-determination in the early 1990s proceeded relatively peacefully. After a few years of *de facto* independence Gagauzia once again opted for a peaceable way and negotiations during its reintegration into Moldova in the mid-1990s.

The region currently experiences multiple problems internally (poor protection of the Gagauz language and culture, weak infrastructure, unemployment, out-migration, etc.), while its relations with the central authorities in Chişinău have usually been uneasy.

The contemporary state of Gagauzia reflects its troubled historical past and geographical location. Having historically lived in a border region various empires fought for and treated as geopolitically important, the Gagauz are still subject to geopolitical influence

¹ Information about the population of Gagauzia. Accessed on May 13, 2019.
<http://www.gagauzia.md/pageview.php?l=ru&idc=363&nod=1&>

of diverse power sources. They share ethnolinguistic connections with Turkey, while maintaining strong historical and present-day affiliation with Russia. With Moldova's desire to drift westward and the European Union's (EU) advance into the region, Gagauzia has been a recipient of European influence, too. Gagauz regional belonging is designed within such a complicated context.

1.2. Statement of the research puzzle

Caught in a tangled web of influences and given the weakness of Moldova, Gagauzia, as a receiver of external soft power initiatives, finds itself in the middle of territorial and ideological rivalries amongst big powers. Three mighty entities, Russia, Turkey and the EU, are in the process of constantly strengthening their influence on Gagauzia. This influence is exerted in the form of geopolitical ideologies: Russian world, Pan-Turkism and EU normative power.

Since the early 1990s Turkey has been a major donor to the region, by referring to linguistic and ethnic ties with the Gagauz and identifying the latter as a brother nation. Impressive are construction and development projects conducted by Turkish party, especially via Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), a governmental agency. Russia, in her turn, relies more on the influence of the Russian language and historical memory in Gagauzia. Moreover, Gagauz Orthodoxy, just like the Moldovan Church, is under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. After the 2014 referendum² in Gagauzia, the European Union began paying more attention to the region. The EU has launched several multi-million-dollar projects (good governance, civil society, youth development, etc.) specifically aimed at the autonomy. Moreover, governments and NGOs of EU member-states do also carry out certain policies (infrastructure projects, citizenship, etc.) in regard with Gagauzia.

It is also substantial to explore Gagauz regional identity and how this small community, which has historically been ruled by bigger groups, ascribes itself to a particular region or geopolitical sphere in light of the rivalry of the afore-mentioned ideologies.

² The referendum in Gagauzia that took place on February 2, 2014 was to determine the entity's foreign policy priorities. More information on the referendum is provided in Chapter 4.

Ethnolinguistic affiliation (ethnic kinship with Turks, Russian as a bridge language in the region), historical narratives (allegiance towards Russia, the painful Romanian period, Soviet nostalgia), complex geopolitical position (the crossroads of the Russia, Turkey and EU), incomplete national consciousness and out-migration (guest workers in Russia and Turkey, as well as in the EU to some extent) further puzzle the situation and serve as factors that influence the regional belonging of Gagauzia, which may be different from that of the parent state.

Voiced by a local student to James Kapaló (2011: 82) during the latter's ethnographic research in the region, the quote "The Turks want to turn us into Turks, the Bulgarians into Bulgarians, the Russians into Russians, the Moldovans into Romanians and now the Greeks want to try the same. Why don't they just let us be Gagauz!" can illustrate the desperate attempts of the Gagauz in seeking their identity and associating it with a certain region, as well as the efforts of the external forces.

1.3. Aims and objectives

As there exists a paucity of literature on how geopolitical ideologies influence regional identity at sub-state level in general, and on Gagauz identity in a geopolitical context in particular, this thesis, therefore, aims to seek answers to the following research questions:

- 1. How do three geopolitical ideologies compete in Gagauzia?*
- 2. How do the geopolitical ideologies shape Gagauz regional identity and how are they reflected in Gagauz narrative about belonging to "different worlds"?*
- 3. How does the competition of geopolitical ideologies affect the Moldovan state?*

The textual body of the thesis is structured in six chapters. The introduction that provides the statement of the research puzzle, announces the main objectives of the study and reports about the existing literature. This part is followed by the theoretical framework that explains the examined concepts, regional identity and geopolitical ideology, and provides descriptions of each geopolitical ideology, Russian world, Pan-Turkism and EU normative power. Chapter 3 comprises research methodology and data collection process the author has used for this work. After the background information (history and current

situation of Gagauzia) comes the empirical part that analyses contemporary Gagauz identity and Gagauz narrative on each geopolitical ideology, as well as on the parent state, Moldova. The thesis ends with the conclusion, list of bibliography and appendices.

This research can hopefully contribute to the general literature on Gagauzia, which is relatively understudied in academia. The work scrutinizes several interesting issues both theoretically and practically: drawing out relationships between geopolitical ideology and regional identity at sub-state level in the context of Gagauzia, Gagauz identity and external affiliation *vis-à-vis* outside geopolitical influences is examined through local elitist narratives.

Moreover, the research presumably provides a new dimension to the concept of regional identity by looking into it through geopolitical lenses as opposed to the context of economic development and EU regionalism usually preferred by scholarship. The term ‘geopolitical ideology’ is also extensively used and explained in this work: by applying a civilizational approach, three specific conceptions (Russian world, Pan-Turkism and EU normative power) are not only described, but also examined through their influences on the studied region.

In addition to the theoretical weight of the thesis, the author expects that the findings can be more effective if employed in practice: different actors that belong to and/or channel certain geopolitical ideologies can review the current situation and (re-)devise their respective policies toward Gagauzia.

1.4. Overview of the existing literature

Although the first ethnographic works on the Gagauz appeared in the closing years of the 19th century (Russian ethnographer V. A. Moshkov) and developed in the first half of the 20th century (Gagauz priest and enlightener M. Çakir), the biggest portion of the relevant literature is the product of the contemporary age.

The major works on Gagauz history were written by Angeli (2006; 2007), Tufar et al. (2015) among others. Kendighelean`s (2009) and Topal`s (2013) memoirs also shed light, albeit subjectively, on the specific period of Gagauz history, namely the Gagauz Republic

and formation of the current Gagauz autonomy. Printed in Russian and available in small quantities, the noted books were accessed by the author in the Comrat Atatürk Library.

Among the Western scholars, Kapaló (2010, 2011) has made an extensive ethnographic research on Gagauzia: his works primarily focus on religious practices and traditions of the Gagauz. Moreover, Menz (2007), Katchanovski (2005), Demirdirek (2000; 2006) have touched upon linguistic particularities and historical memory in the region, as well as sense of belonging and claims over a certain territory. The Gagauz national movement and its relations with the Moldovan government during the 1990s have been researched by numerous scholars, including King (1997), Chinn & Roper (1998), Zabarah (2012).

The 2014 referendum raised more interest in Gagauzia: Kosienkowski (2017a, b), Schlegel (2018) re-examined the political and statehood aspects of the Gagauz autonomy, with the latter also revising them through geopolitical dimension. Several post-2014 articles (Bitkova, 2015; Donaj & Grishin, 2015; Tislenko, 2015) discuss the Gagauz autonomy in the context of the geopolitical struggle of Russia, Turkey and the EU.

A remarkable work was a Master of Arts thesis on Gagauzia presented recently at the University of Tartu. An ethnographic research defended by Christiana Holsapple in 2018 contributes a lot to understanding of Gagauz identity

Although the study of Gagauz regional identity, especially against the background of geopolitical influences and struggles has been very limited, numerous analytical articles appeared in media outlets especially in the aftermath of the 2014 referendum. The event that coincided with the Crimean events further generated interest in this small region, its geopolitical orientation and even its secessionist potential: Gagauzia's being at the crossroads, its relations with Moldova, as well as Gagauzia as a stage for the outside influences (Russia, Turkey, EU) have been discussed on several international platforms (New Eastern Europe, Al Jazeera, FPRI, DW, etc.).

The author himself benefitted from and referred to scholarly articles, analytical pieces and news mainly in English and Russian, as well as, in Turkish, Azerbaijani, Gagauz and even Bulgarian to some extent. The academic literature in Gagauz is almost non-existent, but several Gagauz-language textbooks were also examined during the research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The concept of regional identity

By referring to the case of Gagauzia, this thesis seeks to detect how geopolitical ideology may influence regional identity. Primarily, it should be clarified that while the term ‘region’ may “refer to both sub- and supra-state units” and may be “conceptualised at various spatial scales” (Paasi, 2009: 122), this paper examines the region at a sub-state level, given Gagauzia’s current situation within Moldovan framework.

As a significant aspect for turning regions into “social and political spaces” (Paasi, 2009: 137-138), regional identity is seen by Zimmerbauer & Paasi (2013: 32) as an emotive phenomenon connected with regional consciousness and expressed in a sense of belonging to a specific region. A form of collective identity, regional identity is a social and discursive construct, not a pre-determined cultural phenomenon; it is rather constructed “through, in and against, cultural and political institutions, social movements and processes of governance” (Tomaney, 2007: 357), as a result of the activities of certain groups (e.g., regionalists), who set borders, construct symbols and (re-)intepret (hi)stories (Semian & Chromý, 2014: 264).

Regional identity consists of a material base (e.g., nature, culture, economic system) and a mental sphere or images (Paasi, 1986: 130). According to another classification, regional identity comprises two components: cultural-historical and political-economic (Paasi, 2009: 141), while Semian & Chromý (2014: 264) point to regional identity (consciousness) of the residents and the identity (image) of a region as two separate, interlinked and mutually supplementary components (see *Figure 1*).

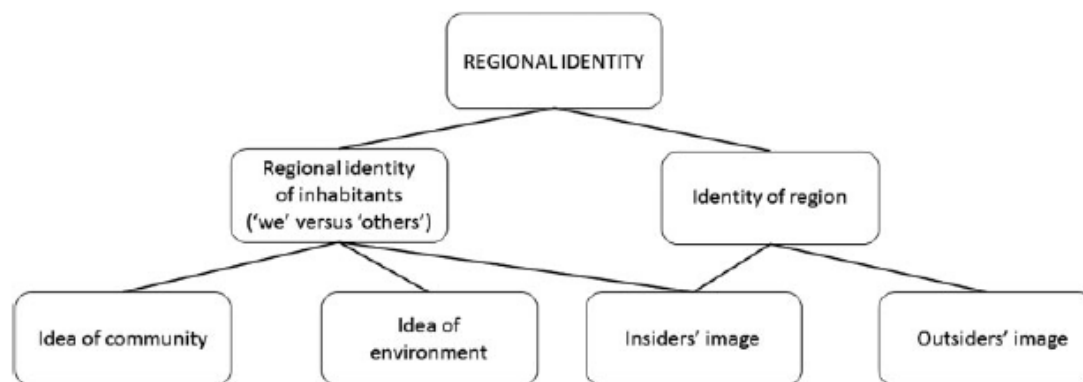


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of regional identity (Semian & Chromý, 2014: 264)

A sense of affiliation with a certain community within a specific territory, regional consciousness or self-understanding differs ‘us’ from ‘them’, other regions and groups. Based on common identification and reproduced through socialization, such a collective dimension of regional identity consists of personal world outlooks of each member and of ideas shared by all group members (Paasi, 1986: 132; Paasi, 2009: 139-140). Besides, this collective identity may be constructed as a regional image either from within (by its own residents) or from outside (by others beyond the region) (Paasi, 1986: 137).

Regional identity has been studied especially within the framework of regional development and the EU’s ‘new European regionalism’, which means new contexts and meanings for European regions. In this regard, internal potential and resources, which influence and are influenced by regional identity, help to elaborate regional development strategies. This phenomenon is, therefore, scrutinized and viewed as an important factor, which cannot only push but also be an obstacle to regional development process (Semian and Chromý, 2014: 264).

Holding a central role in institutionalization of certain territories, regional identity, just like region itself and borders, is a process, which is constructed, institutionalized, changed and terminated by regional institutions and communities (Vainikka, 2012: 2, 8; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013: 31). As elaborated by Passi (1986: 121; 2009: 134-136), the institutionalization of regions as a socio-spatial process develop through four phases,

during which territorial, symbolic and institutional figuration is completed with the role assigned for the region. While all these phases are significant and influence each other, it is usually the fourth one that provides the region with its own identity.

Regional identity can be interpreted and influenced differently by varied agencies connected with the area: political circles are engaged to establish or strengthen their power; business sector is concerned about ensuring and/or growing their economic profit; cultural activists are interested in preserving and reviving local peculiarities (Semian & Chromý, 2014: 265).

Ridanpää (2015: 67) brings attention to “the storied nature of regional identity”, as the latter is created and receives a meaning through human imagination. Meanwhile Tomaney (2007: 355) claims that collective identity relies on “discourses to which intellectuals, cultural producers, and political leaders contribute”.

Regional identity of ethnic minorities can be interesting to study, as their narrative may be designed and/or translated as alternative to the national or dominant narrative; this way, ethnic minorities may try to retain their distinctive nature and resist the majority-led subjugation policy (Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2011: 779).

2.1.1. Gagauz regional identity

Our case stems from regional identity of an ethnic minority within a nation-state. The author is more interested to explore how identity-building regional narrative of the local elite (by referring to Tomaney`s (2007: 355) afore-mentioned argument) may (by countering national narrative) ascribe the focal ethnic minority to an outside source of power (geopolitical ideology), driven by kinship, affiliation, economic development and/or other incentives.

According to Kapaló (2011: 77-78), Gagauz identity is a result of geographical, historical, political and social factors, including post-Soviet existential challenges. It was constructed by emulating discourses, which have “instrumentalised and mythologised narratives of ethnogenesis, origins and religious destiny”.

Analyzing the complicated Gagauz identity, Tislenko (2015: 72) refers to three interwined components that compose this identity:

- 1) The autochthonous component is signified through the Gagauz language, as well as self-governance and national symbols. Yet, Tislenko's explanation on the endangered state of the native idiom due to demographic, not cultural factors, can be challenged. The linguistic and cultural expansion of outside forces, especially Russian, plays a crucial role in undermining the situation of Gagauz since the latter is usually overshadowed and not fully developed as an administrative, academical or "higher society" tongue.
- 2) Next to the autochthonous component is the Russian language, which plays an important role in the region both as an administrative, education and religion language, having transformed the Gagauz "from largely illiterate monoglot speakers of a Turki[c] idiom" (Kapaló, 2011: 82) into a current bilingual ethnic group. Another noteworthy sub-element of Russianness is the Soviet nostalgia (e.g., the collective memory about the Great Patriotic War). While the Gagauz had converted to Ortodoxy long before they fell under Russian influence, their church is presently subject to the Moscow Patriarchate and liturgic sermons in the Gagauz churches are conducted in Russian.
- 3) The third component is the Turkic kinship: despite controversial theories on the Gagauz ethnogenesis, the community of blood and language contributes to the emergence of identity-building myths among both ordinary people and professional historians. The Turkic component also gave strong impetus to and helped to legitimize the autonomy claims of the Gagauz, as well as their relations with Turkey and other Turkic states.

Gagauz regional identity has also been influenced by their status of being a minority: for centuries, this community has been an ethnic and linguistic minority in Bessarabia, a region dominated by Romanian- and Slavic-speakers. In a vast Turkic world, which the Gagauz ethnically and linguistically belong to, they find themselves as a religious minority among the Muslims (Kapaló, 2011: 5). Furthermore, as a double minority, an ethnic minority living within a non-Russian republic, in the former Soviet Union, the Gagauz could not effectively develop their own language, education, bureaucracy and therefore, "are slower in the process of downsizing the Soviet imagination" (Demirdirek, 2000: 72). Therefore, the initial attempts for the Gagauz autonomy were to resist the hegemony of the Moldovan identity, "by embracing the Russian language and Soviet

heritage on the one hand” (Demirdirek, 2006: 45) and by constructing a Gagauz national identity on the other. Moreover, in spite of centuries-long subjection, Gagauz identity itself is not discriminative as its byzantine nature is filled with tolerance and co-existence with other ethnic groups in the multi-ethnic region.

Gagauz regional identity arose as an interesting question in the aftermath of the 2014 referendum. It can be claimed that the plebiscite outcomes plainly demonstrated Gagauzia`s willingness not to become a part of the EU and to join the Russia-led integrationist project instead. However, this theme is yet to be further explored: regions change and develop, and so do regional identities (since they are not fixed and unchanging as noted by Prokkola & Ridanpää (2011: 778)) owing to endogenous processes (political, economic, cultural developments, etc.) and external influences (foreign aid, trade, remittances, etc.). In other words, each year that distances us from the referendum may mean shifts in perceptions of the population and leadership due to internal developments and growing influence of other geopolitical actors.

Moreover, given the “dominant paradigm in regionalist studies which treats the region as an imagined community and a would-be nation in miniature” (Brigevich, 2016: 483), to what extent regional identity narratives may lead Gagauzia`s future self-determination can also be reviewed in order to understand what future path the region may embrace. While regional identity is usually examined for regional development, branding / marketing, as well as cultural discourse (Zimmerbauer & Passi, 2013: 32), this phenomenon is handled as a contested field for geopolitical competition in the thesis.

Therefore, Gagauz regional identity, which is subject to geopolitical influences at least from three directions, must firstly concern the locals, as the certainty in this matter can help the region to formulate its development and foreign policy strategy. Such a clarity would also be important for both Moldova and geopolitical powers, too, for designing their respective policies toward Gagauzia.

The analytical part of the thesis offers an insight into how Gagauz regional identity is constructed in local elite`s narratives.

2.2. The concept of geopolitical ideology

Not frequently used in literature, the concept ‘geopolitical ideology’ can be conceptualized as a set of policies (political, economic, cultural, etc.) by one center to gain power over territory and resources.

Although there have been claims about the end of geopolitics in the post-Cold War era (Tunjic, 1999: 90; Peter, 1999), competition for power over territory and resources has not yet ended. While the liberal discourse points to “geopolitics as an anachronistic practice” (Toal, 2017: 21) that aggressive great powers use to challenge liberal order and values, the realist story asserts that geopolitical practices are important as all great powers concern about security in their neighborhoods. The political-geographic struggle of international actors “for spreading national, state or bloc interests” in order to obtain “political, economic and military power”, influence and control (Tunjic, 1999: 92) over physical territories, human and mineral resources, as well as other values does still take place, thus, keeping geopolitical thinking alive.

Toal (2017: 39-40) and O’Loughlin et al. (2005: 324) offer the term ‘geopolitical culture’, which may refer to “the identity of a territorial entity and the locational narrative it presents to itself and the world” (Toal, 2017: 39). This concept possesses ideological power alongside economic and security power networks, while geopolitical culture’s ideological aspect generates the civilizational (identity) form of geopolitical thinking.

Geopolitical cultures are constructed through state institutions, historical experiences, geographical specifications, relevant identity formations, geopolitical traditions and imaginations. Geographical traditions (high culture) and imaginations (low culture) about Self and Other are important images and discourses that draw the boundaries of identity and difference of particular civilizations (O’Loughlin et al., 2005: 324). In other words, geopolitical culture defines the geopolitical actor’s “sense of identity, place, and mission in the world” (Toal, 2017: 39-40).

The scenario forecasted for the post-Cold War era, in the form of the clash of civilizations, may also work as inter-civilizational geopolitics, which may shape struggles or dialogues among several civilizations (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2011: 180-181). They serve as sources of influence and soft power policies, which can be summarized as ideologies for this context.

As self-contained entities, civilizations are essentially ideological; thus, the ideological values they offer both for their domestic population and external targets shape dynamics inside and among civilizations.

Throughout the text the author tends to use the phrase ‘geopolitical ideology,’ which, in his thinking, best fits for the three concepts discussed, analyzed and compared in this thesis. The producers of geopolitical ideologies in this context are broader civilizations and geopolitical realms that include and are represented by post-Westphalian states and supranational entities, as well as different non-governmental organizations. As civilizational approach is employed in this geopolitical system, the three ideologies may represent and/or overlap with the following civilizations: Russian world as part of Eurasianism, EU normative power as part of Europe / West / trans-Atlanticism, Pan-Turkism as part of Orientalism / Islam. The following sub-chapters present some information on each geopolitical ideology.

2.2.1. The Russian world

The Russian world or *Russkiy mir* is a polysemous, fluid and ambiguous concept, which can echo “the ancient perception of a shared civilizational space” (Laruelle, 2015: 3). The term ‘Russian world’ can be explained as part of close conceptions that define the post-Soviet space as a region of specifically important to Russia’s interests, such as “the near abroad,” “historical space of Russia”, “the space of Russian language”, and “the territory of Russia’s responsibility” (O’Loughlin et al., 2017: 7).

The ideological conceptualization of the Russian world has evolved since the 1990s, when the active search for post-Soviet Russia’s self-definition, geopolitical place and ideology was underway and became influenced by a number of factors, including diminished territory, up to 25 million ethnic Russians outside of the Russian Federation, ethno-territorial conflicts and geopolitical powers advancing into Russia’s Near Abroad. Since then the ideology has taken different forms: revanchist irredentism, confrontational and isolationist visions, as well as a moderate and radical soft power instrument.

The present term of the Russian world was conceptualized and developed by Petr Shchedrovitsky and Gleb Pavlovsky in the 1990s (Polegkyi, 2011: 15; Laruelle, 2015: 3;

Suslov, 2018: 334). According to the former (2000a), “The Russian world is a network structure of large and small communities that think and speak Russian”, while the latter claims, “Russia remains a specific civilization, which masters all civilizations with its concise complexity, permeability, and powerful vocal and intellectual capacity that appeals to all human beings.” (Laruelle, 2015: 4).

In their 1999 article, Shchedrovitsky and Ostrovsky elaborated on their definition, referring to a peaceful reestablishment of Russia’s identity and its reconnection with its past and its diasporas, as well as proposing a “progressive empire” rather than “aggressive”. They also emphasized a shared destiny, along with the Russian language, for Russians. In his turn, Polegkyi (2011: 16-18) presents three cornerstones that construct the Russian world: Russian language, Orthodox church and historical memory. O’Loughlin et al. (2017: 5) distinguish three “interconnected sets of meaning”: linguistic/cultural, biopolitical, and spiritual. According to both Putin (2018) and Nikonov (2017), one of the main proponents of the Russian world concept, Russianness is based mostly on the spiritual affiliation with Russia (mainly Russian language, as well as culture and history), not on ethnicity or Orthodoxy.

In its initial, depoliticized meaning as a cultural and linguistic realm, the Russian world could be understood as a cultural sphere of the Russian language and its products. Just like the Francophone world which extends beyond France’s borders, the Russian world appears as a community of a shared spoken language and culture. A language-centric definition, however, is unavoidably entangled with the geopolitical situation of Russian compatriots (*sootchestvenniki*) abroad. Both ethnicity and cultural/linguistic dimensions form the main core of the Russian world, ethnic Russians and Russophones, a community, which, according to Suslov (2017: 3), “outside Russia has been ideologically constructed and politically instrumentalized by the Kremlin’s leadership.”

The term ‘compatriots’ came to its present meaning in the early 1990s with the new geopolitical order and the sense of responsibility to those beyond Russia’s borders who looked to the country as a cultural hearth and for protection (O’Loughlin et al., 2017: 5; Suslov, 2018: 337). Although this term was legally defined in a 1999 federal law in Russia, its vague meaning has served as a catch-all label to justify policies intended to

“protect” whoever classifies as a compatriot by Russian governmental definition (ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers, “passportized” compatriots) (Pieper, 2018: 16).

In geopolitical discourses diaspora typically comes as a model of influence without a sphere, which facilitates indirect political advantage beyond the state borders by simultaneously presenting suitable prospects for soft power influence (Suslov, 2018: 333). As Putin also once explained, the concept of the Russian world “from time immemorial went far beyond the geographical boundaries of Russia and even far beyond the boundaries of the Russian ethnos” (O’Loughlin et al., 2017: 6).

Another uniting bond within the Russian world discourse are Russian Orthodoxy and the traditional values it supports (as alternative to liberal democracy) (Kudors, 2015). East Slavic countries, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, as well as Moldova and Kazakhstan belong to the geographical space the Patriarchate of Moscow and all Rus` has an authority over (Laruelle, 2015: 15). The Orthodox Church, both cultural heritage and a strong government-affiliated institution, has been active in maintaining supranational values in Russian consciousness and the unity of Russian civilizational space (Polegkyi, 2011: 18).

The shared legacy serves as another pillar of the Russian world concept. Not only overall Soviet nostalgia, but also certain episodes from the near past, most notably the Great Patriotic War, are among the common bonds (Polegkyi, 2011: 18) that hold together millions of former Soviet citizens. In this regard, Russian and Soviet identities may be considered as parts of the same continuum, with the Soviet past having been mythologized and inserted into the present Russian world (Kuzio, 2015: 159).

Nikonov (2017) assumes that a polyethnic, multi-confessional and polysemantic Russian world is Russia plus the Russian abroad. Similarly, Pieper (2018: 8) summarizes the Russian World as a “supranational structure that consists of Russia, the Russian diaspora abroad and Russian speaking communities, which consider Russia as their cultural and spiritual center”. Suslov (2017: 10) brings three types of people that could be ascribed to the Russian world (beyond Russia proper): 150 million of the former Soviet citizens, 15 million ethnic Russians, some 5 million emigrated citizens of the Russian Federation.

Depending on the selected ideological constructs, this thesis combines the following aspects for constructing Russianness: Russian language, Russian ethnicity, Orthodox Church, Soviet legacy (*see* Table 1).

Table 1. Construction of Russianness

Parameters of Russianness	Ethnic Russians in the Near Abroad	Non-Russian former Soviet citizens	Global Russians
Russian language	Yes	Yes or No	Yes
Russian ethnicity	Yes	No	Irrelevant
Orthodox Church	Yes	Yes or No	Yes
Soviet legacy	Yes	Yes	Irrelevant

Conceived in the 1990s as a culturally-bounded, deterritorialized network community, the concept of the Russian world was further developed, first as a nation-state and its loyal diaspora, later as an expanding state-civilization (Suslov, 2018: 346). Institutionalizing and instrumentalizing of the Russian world took place mainly in the first decade of the 20th century, when the diaspora policy was designated along the following lines: first, its strategic planning became further centralized within and influenced by the Kremlin; second, the 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine pushed the Russian leadership to a more aggressive and anti-Western position (Suslov, 2018: 338); third, with the creation of several organizations, most notably, the Russkiy Mir Foundation³ in 2007 and the Rossotrudnichestvo⁴ federal agency in 2008, the compatriot policy was frameworked within government-affiliated organizations (Suslov, 2017: 22-23; Suslov, 2018: 339).

Russia's claims to "protect" Russians abroad were translated into a foreign policy objective with the outbreak of war in Georgia in 2008, when the concept was weaponized,

³ About Russkiy Mir Foundation. Accessed on May 9, 2019, <https://russkiymir.ru/en/fund/index.php>

⁴ About Rossotrudnichestvo. Accessed on May 9, 2019, <http://rs.gov.ru/en/about>

but this time as hard power. The protection of compatriots in Georgia's breakaway provinces South Ossetia and Abkhazia featured prominently in Russia's rhetoric to justify a "rescue mission" for allegedly humanitarian reasons (Pieper, 2018: 16).

Suslov (2017: 14, 25) notes that the concept started drifting towards being a geopolitical tool from merely serving as a cultural-diasporal frame in 2012. After Putin's return to the Russian presidency in that year, the notion 'Russian world' switched to a more pronounced civilizational meaning. According to Nikonov (2017), internally, within Russia, 'Russian' usually means ethnocultural identity, while externally, it becomes supra-ethnic, superethnic, and in a certain sense civilizational. In this sense, as a global signifier, this new meaning was supposed to explain Russia as a "distinctive world power with its own civilizational space" (O'Loughlin et al., 2017: 7). The Russian world, thus, became one of the ideological foundations of multi-polarity in Russia's foreign policy terminology (Laruelle 2015: 21) and a response, as a conservative conception, to the challenges of Westernism and globalization (Kudors, 2015).

Laruelle (2015: 9-11) lists several channels of the Russian influence to the Russian world: economic tools (investments, pressure), multilateral organizations, NGO diplomacy, culture, education media and language promotion, guest workers in Russia, repatriation, citizenship policy and passportization.

While the Russian world was initially accepted by the neighboring post-Soviet countries with fear and caution, the post-Crimean situation further antagonized this term for them: unlike the previous understanding of Russian world as a network community of deterritorialized Russian-speakers, its geopolitical narrative became irredentist (Suslov, 2018: 344) and took rather a practical meaning as recollecting of the Russian lands (Piontkovsky, 2014). Thus, Wawrzonek sees the *Russkiy mir* as a doctrinal foundation (2014: 760) and pretext (2014: 776) for Russia's political, economic or security pressures toward the neighboring countries.

As seen, the concept 'Russian world' is a "geopolitical imagination, a fuzzy mental atlas" and "a floating signifier" (Laruelle, 2015: 1), which may encompass various regions connected with Russia in different and blurry ways. This blurriness, however, allows numerous interpretations depending on the context. Firstly, it can serve as a reasoning for Russia's assertive policy especially in the Near Abroad (Pieper, 2018: 9-10). Secondly,

this framework reconnects the present-day Russia with its “pre-Soviet and Soviet past through reconciliation with Russian diasporas abroad” (Laruelle, 2015: 1). Further, it is an ambitious project the Kremlin wants to use as a “global ideological influence” it lost with the end of Communism (O’Loughlin et al., 2017: 7).

2.2.2. Pan-Turkism

Pan-Turkism is an ideological movement which emerged during the 1880s among Turkic intellectuals of the Russian and Ottoman empires, with its aim being the solidarity or union of all Turkic ethnic groups “bound to each other by a common or kindred language, race or tradition” (Landau, 1995: 180) while they are scattered across different states, both Turkic and non-Turkic. The rise of this phenomenon was inspired by and as a response to the development of other pan-ethnic movements, especially Pan-Slavism in Russia (Landau, 1991: 82; Hyman, 1997: 341-342; Tüfekçi, 2017: 13).

Since the late 19th century, Pan-Turkism has evolved through several stages. The first phase is marked with the theoretical foundations of this ideology. Initiated by İsmail Gaspıralı from the Crimean Tatars, who proposed one all-Turkic language (Landau, 1991: 82-83; Bekirova, 2018), Yusuf Akçura (1904) from Kazan Tatars who authored *Three Types of Policy*, the earliest manifesto of the Pan-Turkic nationalism, as well as Əhməd bəy Ağaoğlu and Əli bəy Hüseynzadə from Azerbaijan (Landau, 1991: 83-84), the concept became more widespread among Ottoman intellectuals during the twilight of the empire (Landau, 1995; Hyman, 1997).

Pan-Turkism’s principles were famously conceptualized by Ziya Gökalp. In his 1923 *The Principles of Turkism*, Gökalp (1968) stated that Turkism means to exalt the Turkish / Turkic nation and defined Pan-Turkism “as a cultural, academic, philosophical and political school of thought and concept advocating the unity of Turkic peoples”. His view of Pan-Turkic development distinguished three magnitudes of Turkism:

1) *Turkeyism*: strengthening national culture and solidarity of the Turks in the Republic of Turkey; 2) *Oghuzism* or *Turkmenism*: reaching as an immediate goal an Oghuz unity, which would consist of Oghuz Turks (also known as Turkmens) of Azerbaijan, Iran and Khwarazm, who share almost the same language and one common culture with the Turks

of Turkey; thus, these four groups can form Oghuzistan⁵; 3) *Turanism*: striving as a long-range ideal for the unity of more distant Turkic-speaking peoples, such as Yakuts, Kirghiz, Uzbeks, Kipchaks and Tatars, which together with the Oghuz group constitute Greater Turkistan.

Blended with romantic and emotional ideals, the doctrine of the Pan-Turkic irredentism constructs “common history, common language, common identity and common culture”⁶ as the main pillars for cultural and, if possible, for political union.

As in similar cases with other Pan-ideologies, Pan-Turkism aimed to revive an ancient culture, as part of its search for common roots. The rediscovery and reassertion of their own culture was suitable for creating a nation of all the fellow-nationals and differentiating them from others. Together with the ancient culture, which is a joint patrimony, other symbols, such as common origin myths and totems were also constructed during the theoretical foundation of Pan-Turkism: Grey Wolf (*Bozkurt*)⁷ as a mythical ancestor (Atsız, 1972; Babayev, 2016; Tüfekçi, 2017: 14), Ergenekon as a legend of origin (Ünver, 2009: 1-2), Altaic and Tian Shen mountains as a sacralized point where the Turks originated in and spread to the world from (Bayat, 2016; Karluk, 2019). Historical victories have also been mythicized to glorify the Turkic past and superiority (e.g. the Great Wall of China was erected to resist the ancient Turkic tribes, who nevertheless overcame it (Sarı, 2016; Osman, 2017) or Atilla as a great Turkic leader, who conquered Europe and forced the Pope to kneel^{8 9}).

Geography holds an important position within the Turkic ideology: the enthusiasm for building links of hundreds of millions of blood brethren scattered across the vast territory was popular already in the early 20th century and best reflected in the poem *Turan* by

⁵ The object of our study, the Gagauz, as an Oghuz group could fit Gökalp's second magnitude.

⁶ About Turkic Council. Accessed on May 3, 2019. <https://www.turkkon.org/en/turk-konseyi-hakkinda>

⁷ The flag of the unrecognized Gagauz Republic, the predecessor of the the current Gagauz autonomy, was also decorated with wolf's head.

⁸ Roma Papasına diz çökdürən “Tanrının qırmancı” – Hun imperatoru Atilla (in Azerbaijani). Accessed on May 4, 2019. <http://strateq.az/arashdirma/66804/roma-papasina-diz-cokdur%C9%99n-tanri-girmanci.html>

⁹ Attila: Avrupa'da “Tanrı'nın Kırbağı” olarak anılan Attila, tarihte papaya diz çöktüren tek hükümdardır (in Turkish). Accessed on May 4, 2019. <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/kimdir/Attila>

Gökalp (1911): “The fatherland for Turks is not Turkey, nor yet Turkestan. The fatherland is a vast and eternal land: Turan!”

Central to Pan-Turkic discourse, the popular motto “From the Adriatic / the Balkans to the Chinese wall” (Efegil, 2008: 167; Kara, 2012: 157; Bayaliyev, 2014) points to the ideology’s geographical ambitions. Interestingly enough, one of the last famous references to this slogan was made by Turkish President Erdoğan, who re-affirmed “We are a big family of 300 million people from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China!”¹⁰ in fall 2018 in Gagauzia, one of the westernmost corners of the Turkosphere.

Meanwhile, religion’s place within Pan-Turkism is somewhat ambivalent. It can partly be intertwined with and/or internalize Islamic elements, given the Muslim background of most of the Turkic peoples, which is mirrored the formula “Turkicization, Islamicization and modernization” that entered into circulation in the early 20th century echoes (Gökalp, 2014). However, opposite views may also favor revival of Tengriism and Shamanism, ancient Turkic faiths (Ayupov, 2012).

The mid-20th century also saw the organizational efforts within Pan-Turkism, which re-entered Turkey’s political mainstream in the 1950s-1960s. The most famous of such organizations were the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) and its radical wing, Idealist Clubs/Hearths (*Ülkü Ocakları*) also known as Grey Wolves (*Bozkurtlar*) (Landau, 1988; Landau, 1991: 90). Having never become a dominant force in domestic political spectrum, NMP and Grey Wolves, however, were quite vocal and occasionally shaped Turkish and international politics (usually having anti-Russian and/or anti-Communist flavour).

The transformation of Pan-Turkism from an internal political movement into a geopolitical concept coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union and emergence of independent Turkic states. The vacuum created by the dissolution of the USSR opened gates wide for Turkey’s penetration into Caucasus and Central Asia rich in natural resources. It was that time, when the Grey Wolves proposed “a pan-Turkish extension of the Turkish nation-state” (Tunander, 1995) by embracing newly independent Turkic

¹⁰ “Biz Adriyatik’ten Çin Seddi’ne ulaşan 300 milyonluk büyük bir aileyiz” (in Turkish). October 18, 2018. Accessed on May 3, 2019. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/webtv/turkiye/biz-adriyatikten-cin-seddine-ulasan-300-milyonluk-buyuk-bir-aileyiz>

states. The renewed Pan-Turkism would also target Turkic minorities (some with autonomies) within Russia, Iran, China, Moldova. Since the early 1990s, these Turkic states and communities have been represented as Turkey's siblings, toward whom it has a historical responsibility (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2011: 188; Kara, 2012: 157-170).

Geopolitically, Turkey realized how important the afore-mentioned regions would grow both as a source of natural reserves and a transit corridor between Europe and China (Balcer, 2012). Having taken advantage of this historical opportunity, Turkey under late President Turgut Özal moved swiftly to strengthen its ties with the new Turkic republics, primarily through investment and social initiatives (Bayaliyev, 2014). Encouraged by Özal, Turkish businesses became heavily engaged, having made investments and supported the establishment of private sector in these former socialistic countries (Landau, 1995: 208-209; Kara, 2012). Turkey's soft power was driven also by Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA)¹¹ established in 1992 for "providing economic, technical, social assistance" (Bilgin & Bilgiç, 2011: 186) to the Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan. In other words, Turkey enormously contributed to post-Soviet transition its kin states in the 1990s.

However, the speculations (mainly in Turkey and Azerbaijan) on a Turkic union to grow as another global power (to be on par with the USA, the EU, Russia and China) in the 1990s made many regional states (especially those with Turkic ethnic groups), Russia, China, and Iran, perceive Pan-Turkism as a new form of Turkey's imperial ambitions (Kara, 2012; Valvo, 2012).

The ongoing phase can be marked with institutionalization of the Turkic world with Turkey being the main promoter of such cooperation. It started with activities in the cultural sphere in the 1990s, when the first Pan-Turkic entity, the International Organization of Turkic Culture (Türksoy)¹² was established (Balcer, 2012: 154). Moreover, the summits of the heads of independent Turkic states have been held regularly since 1992 (Kaplan et al., 2015: 126).

This institutionalization took a more serious turn in the 2000s, when the sovereign Turkic states aimed to form an economic and political integration similar to the European Union.

¹¹ History of TİKA. Accessed on May 3, 2019. https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/page/history_of_tika-8526

¹² About Türksoy. Accessed on May 3, 2019. <https://www.turksoy.org/tr/turksoy/about>

The major intergovernmental organization, Turkic Council, was established in 2009. Its primary organs are the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Council of Elders, the Senior Officials Committee and the Secretariat. Their activities are assisted by affiliated structures such as the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic Speaking Countries (TurkPA), Türksoy, the International Turkic Academy, the Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation, the Turkic Business Council and the Turkic University Union¹³.

The Pan-Turkic concept has over a century evolved from irredentism to solidarity to current supranational institutionalism. It is still a vivid ideology that can be geopolitically instrumentalized. No matter how much other independent and dependent Turkic entities weigh, Turkey, as the most powerful and best-established out of them, is still a central actor within the Turkic domain. Therefore, this paper focuses more on Turkey`s foreign policy and soft power within Pan-Turkic paradigm.

2.2.3. EU normative power

A post-Westphalian political entity and specific international actor, the European Union has for decades amassed a rich experience of integration and collaboration and been exporting certain values and norms. Conceptualized initially as a civil(ian) and later as a normative power, the EU is founded on a constellation of values and principles that lie at the heart of its external policies. For countries that strive to be Europeanized, adopting these values is a key condition: it was best displayed during the integration of former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which successfully accomplished their transition by internalizing European norms and resetting their institutional system (Valiyeva, 2016: 20; Zielonka, 2013: 42-43).

Ideas related to civilian power which could best fit Europe`s global actorness were initially offered by François Duchêne, advisor to Jean Monnet (Manners, 2000: 3; Sjørnsen, 2005: 1; Bachmann & Sidaway, 2008: 95). With this approach Duchêne claimed that in the geopolitical conditions of the 1970s, a period marked by increasing economic interdependencies, integrational and globalisation processes, the power of the common European structures in international system should be based not on military force, but on

¹³ About Turkic Council. Accessed on May 3, 2019. <https://www.turkkon.org/en/turk-konseyi-hakkinda>

their common market, economic and political tools, through which Europe could designate areas of influence in the world (Gerrits, 2009: 1, 3; Skolimowska, 2015: 115). Against the backdrop of the American-Soviet rivalry that shaped Europe's geopolitical identity, Duchêne argued that the continent should seek a flexible alternative conception (Bachmann & Sidaway, 2008: 96-97). In the center of civilian power identity is the claim that Europe could exert a positive and stabilizing influence on the international system, given the continent's own experience of transformation from a historical domain of geopolitical conflicts to a system of integration (Bachmann & Sidaway, 2008: 97; Skolimowska, 2015: 114-116).

In the early 2000s, the EU's global civilian power was announced as "a wider aspiration about Europe's collective world role" by Javier Solana (Bachmann & Sidaway, 2008: 95) and for "sustainable global development" by Romano Prodi (Manners, 2000: 26).

Developed by Manners (2000; 2002; 2006), the concept 'normative power' should be understood as the ability of one international actor to exert its ideological influence on other members in international relations (described as 'power over opinion' and 'ideological power') (Skolimowska, 2015: 116-117) and to shape or normalize the international environment through rules and values (Valiyeva, 2016: 15). In this vision, 'Normative Power Europe' is assigned to act through *functional* spheres of influence, such as values, commerce and diplomacy rather than primarily *territorial ones* (Sjursen, 2005: 4-5; Bachmann & Sidaway, 2008: 97). In other words, promoting European standards, norms, principles and procedures (Gerrits, 2009: 2; Skolimowska, 2015: 112) (rather than using coercive means) constitutes one of the most important dimensions of the EU's geopolitical ideology that secures its international and regional actorness (Christou, 2010: 415-416; Nitoiu & Sus, 2019: 2).

According to Manners (2002: 240-241), the normative power the EU possesses stems from several sources: historical context (the legacy of two world wars), hybrid polity (a post-Westphalian character with supranational and international institutions) and political-legal constitutionalism (an elite-driven, treaty-based legal order).

In the center of EU's geopolitical soft power lies its attractiveness, while the so-called EU-universal norms, peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as multilateralism, good governance, and the

restriction of the use of force as a means for international politics have been designated as the core for the European normative ideology (Aggestam, 2009: 28; Manners, 2002: 242-243; Manners, 2009: 3; Nitoiu & Sus, 2019: 4; Skolimowska, 2015: 117). Moreover, concepts such as collective security and positive interdependence instead of unilateral action and competing interests (Sjursen, 2005: 4; Popescu, 2008: 425) are also prioritized within this framework. Diffused beyond the EU's boundaries, these values construct its attraction: "most neighbouring countries wish to join it rather than balance or resist it, and other regional groupings around the world seek to emulate it" (Valiyeva, 2016: 13).

Three supplementary roles for the EU, a normative power, in international system are specified by Bachmann & Sidaway (2008: 99): 1) The EU as a *model* "for regional integration and the development of peace and prosperity", after and despite centuries of bloody conflicts on European soil. 2) The EU as a *promoter* or a force for international diffusion of universal values and democratic standards. 3) The EU as a *counterweight* to alternative sources of influence.

At the same time, Zielonka (2013), Del Sarto (2016) and Pänke (2019) focus on the EU's imperial paradigm, calling the entity a "normative empire" or "liberal empire", its external engagement "normative imperialism". Despite its unique and *sui generis* nature, the EU is described by Pänke (2019: 103) as "part of a political continuum", which is "inextricable from its historical roots and predecessors": the EU model seems to be derived from legacies of imperial rule, since empires also aim at hegemony in vast "and politically, economically, and culturally diverse geographical spaces". As Zielonka (2013: 35-36) explains, the EU is a modern type of empire, which may not resemble the nineteenth-century classic imperial powers, having "neither a clearly defined centre of authority nor a sizable military". Nonetheless, possessing all the key features of empires, the EU acts the way its imperial predecessors had always done. According to both Pänke (2019) and Zielonka (2013: 35-36), even the claims about Europe as a promoter of its internal values' or as a 'civilizing power' can echo with earlier imperialistic conceptions of Europe's *mission civilisatrice*.

Though the EU has based its foreign policy on peace and cooperation and is set to avoid "traditional trappings of geopolitics and *realpolitik*" (Nitoiu & Sus, 2019: 2), it has always been under the pressure of geography and had to take into account spatial dimension: the

EU holds a distinct geographical space, while striving to disseminate its values and norms to adjacent areas. The Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods are bright examples of geography the EU external policies have had direct interactions with.

The EU's aspiration to multiply its template or produce an international *milieu* resembling its own model epitomises one of its central foreign policy and ideological objectives (Valiyeva, 2016: 15). The EU's neighbourhood policies or *milieu* goals are designed to shape conditions beyond the entity's boundaries and transform the adjacent environment rather than to defend or increase its possessions (Beauguitte et al., 2015: 10). Ambitions to shape the adjacent territories and international neighbourhood in accordance with one's own vision and normative order stem from and are motivated by own security and even survival concerns (Valiyeva, 2016: 16).

Since the early 1990s, the EU's *milieu* projects have been concentrating chiefly on the former Communist and Soviet countries in Central and Eastern Europe,. Within the normative duty narrative, an actualization of the EU's *milieu* goals indicates Europeanization of neighboring regions or development of an international environment akin to European: after all, a "ring of friends" or regions consisting of democratic, stable and prosperous nations with effective governance and universal values, would best fit the interests of European security.

Nonetheless, the EU's region-building efforts in the neighbourhood are usually one-sided and reflect the EU's own geopolitical imagination. The 2003 European Neighbourhood Policy and the 2009 Eastern Partnership frameworks "aimed at the extension of EU values and norms to neighbours through conditionality and extended governance" (Raik, 2019: 55) and were constructed to ensure security, stability, prosperity, shared values and the rule of law in the EU's direct neighbourhood by offering "everything but institutions" (Chilosi, 2006). Though these projects mainly provide fertile ground for future perspectives rather than direct integration, they may still be interpreted as the acknowledgement of six post-Soviet countries as a natural part of European normative order (Christou 2010: 413-416; Valiyeva, 2016: 18).

The EU's eastward geopolitical ambitions are characterized by several factors, including weakly governance, political and economic instability, the so-called frozen (but active)

conflicts (whose potential spillover threatens the EU’s own security), as well as the claims to the region by another important regional security actor, Russia (Christou, 2010: 413).

By quoting Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande, Bachmann & Sidaway (2008: 104) explain that the European project cannot and must not identify where Europe and its influence ends, instead seeing Europe as a continuous process of improvement and evolution.

2.3. Toal’s “contested geopolitical field” model

The studied theme, Gagauz regional identity *vis-à-vis* geopolitical ideologies, involves several actors. Thus, Gagauzia, which for centuries has been situated at the crossroads of empires, once again finds itself in and as a field for geopolitical competition. This struggle occurs at several – sub-national, national and international – levels. A complicated situation observed in Gagauzia can match and be studied through the “contested geopolitical field” model by Toal (2017: 33).

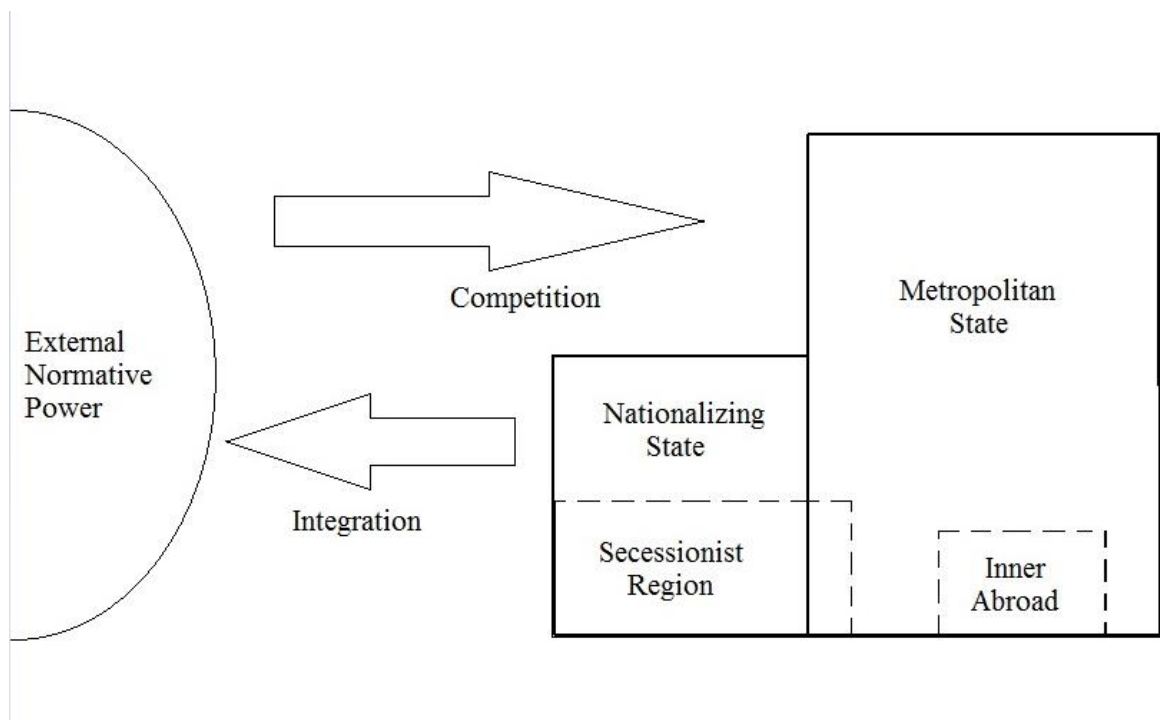


Figure 2. Post-Soviet space as a contested geopolitical field

(original model by Toal, 2017: 38)

Toal's model (2017: 36) is based on the geopolitical situation in a post-imperial area. Projected after the post-Soviet space, the original model comprises the following actors:

1) *A metropolitan state*, which tries to find a stable post-imperial identity for itself and to maintain its influence over the former imperial territories. A post-Soviet Russia is implied as the metropolitan state within this model.

2) *An inner abroad* within the metropolitan power is a non-core nation that strives for larger autonomy or even independence. Russia's ethnic federal subjects, such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya suit this role.

3) *Nationalizing states*, former parts of the imperial entity, either border or are close to the metropolitan state. Their main aim is to get rid of the imperial legacy, as well as post-imperial (inter)dependence with the metropolitan power. Joining alternative integrational and security projects to counter the metropolitan power's hegemony is among the options for nationalizing states, which constitute some post-Soviet states, including Moldova.

4) *Secessionist regions* are minority areas and/or entities inside nationalizing states. These could be latent or active secessionist movements given the developments in early post-imperial years, as well as the current relations between nationalizing states and their minorities. Such regions may share direct border with the metropolitan power and (even in the absence of such physical contact) maintain historically positive attitude historical connection with the metropolitan power. In some cases, secessionist movements may even have kindred regions in the metropolitan power. Gagauzia that has historical connections to Russia and shares ethno-linguistic kinship with some of Russia's subjects (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, etc.) perfectly fits this model. Other bright examples could be Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which also border Russia and have relative ethnic areas: Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia, and North Ossetia respectively.

5) *An external normative power* in its turn tries to expand its sphere of influence over former imperial territories. The European Union assumes this role in Toal's model.

Putting together all the pieces of puzzles, we receive the following picture: Russia, as the major exporter of the Russian world concept is the metropolitan state that strives to maintain post-imperial sphere of influence; Russia's own inner abroad, many ethnic federal subjects, contains potential for bigger autonomy or even independence; Moldova,

a nationalizing state, belongs to this sphere of influence but seeks to break the dependence from the metropolitan state and possibly to join alternative regional projects; Gagauzia is a national minority regional organization that has closer ties with the metropolitan state than with the nationalizing state it is part of. The European Union fits the external normative power, the fifth player type in Toal's model, which is eager to expand its influence into the post-Soviet space.

This model serves as a good template with the author's own addition: a factor of a kin-state. Thus, enter a sixth actor in this field:

6) *An external kin power* also seeks to broaden its influence into post-imperial space, both toward Secessionist Region (4) in Nationalizing State (3) and even Inner Abroad (2) within Metropolitan State (1). As a kin power, Turkey is an alternative source of geopolitical ideology that clashes with others over Gagauzia. Additionally, the geopolitical concept Turkey offers may also target Russia's Turkic subjects.

As a result, with the author's modification the thesis receives the following contested geopolitical field model as depicted in Figure 3.

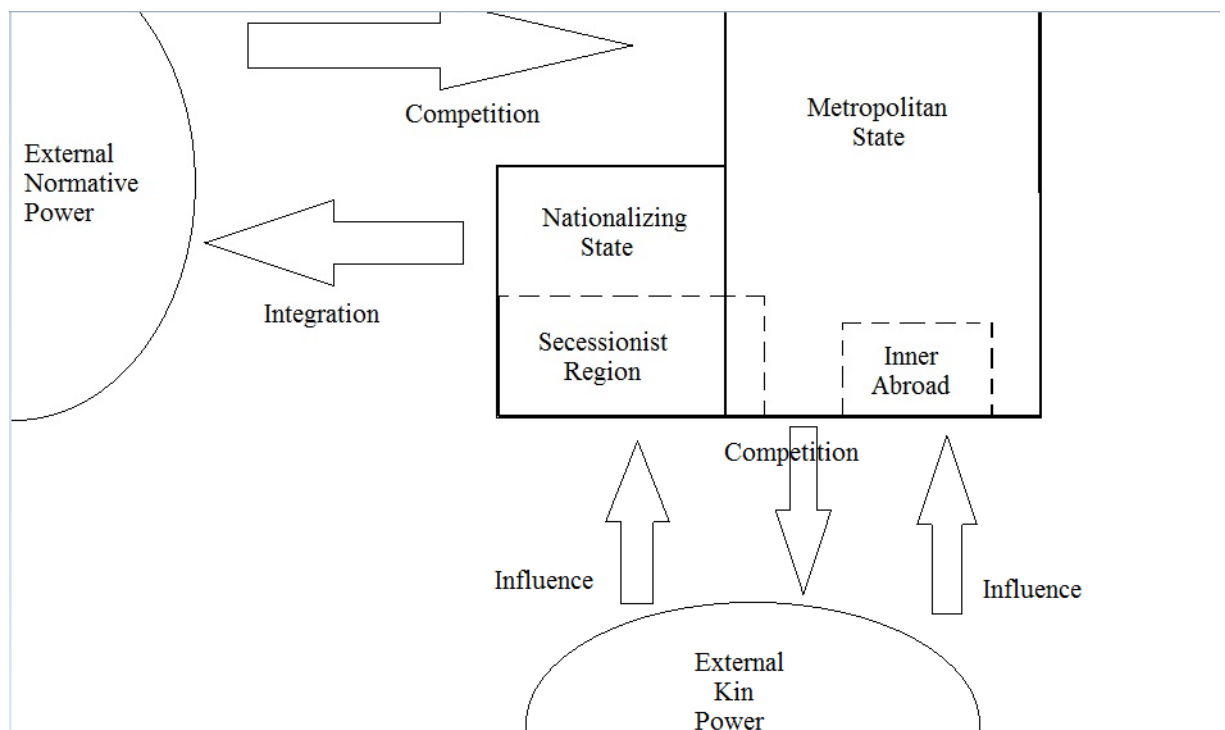


Figure 3. Post-Soviet space as a Contested Geopolitical Field

(model modified by author)

This model could be further perplexed by adding a seventh actor, a kin state which wants to (re)unify with Nationalizing State, with the former being Romania. Not so relevant for the topic of this thesis to be presented as a separate actor in our puzzle, Romania is, nevertheless, examined within the EU normative power domain.

While national minorities within nationalizing successor states strive to develop distinct regional identities, these minorities are still subject to the geopolitical projections of various actors. As Toal (2017: 35) explains, a set of different factors impacts regional identities of such non-core groups: their quantity, the level of their development and prosperity, the degree of local autonomy, potential for further development of this autonomy, the extent of popular mobilization, strength of local organizations, etc. The aspects of external influences, geopolitical ideologies, in the Gagauz context are discussed in the following parts of the thesis.

3. Research design and methodology

3.1. Research strategy

This thesis is founded on qualitative research, which can be suitable for an in-depth study of a limited number of complex cases, by employing constructive and interpretive approaches. The former asserts that knowledge is a product of social processes, while the latter seeks to understand various phenomena (events and actions) through the meanings ascribed to them by people (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015: 2).

Within this study regional identity is conceptualized as collective consciousness of the region's denizens rather than the image of the region; the former is more complicated and emotional and can be expressed through narratives.

Narrative, as a combination of storylines of individuals and collectives, aims to make sense of human experience and construct it into meaningful episodes (Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2011: 777; Subotić, 2013: 306; Tamboukou, 2015: 39). It can provide sufficient information on how people perceive what surrounds them, how they construct and reconstruct their concept of Self and Other in terms of time and place that constantly manipulate identity (Patterson & Monroe 1998: 316; Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2011: 778). Not only does narrative – written, oral, visual – transmit knowledge and reality, but also create it: narrative orders our world, by enabling and limiting representation.

As narrative influences our perceptions of political reality, which in turn influences our responses to political events; in other words, narrative plays a significant role in constructing political behavior. In this sense, we create and utilize narratives to interpret and understand political realities that surround us (Patterson & Monroe 1998: 315).

Tamboukou (2015: 40) essentializes three key features of narrative: temporality (sequence of events), meaningfulness and sociality. The author would add spatiality into this framework as narrative is usually associated with certain geographic location. Spatial identity may be linked with narrative, which means that individuals express a sense of who they are and where they belong to. Constructing and shaping spatial consciousness and social practices from above and charged with political, economic, cultural interests, such discourses can then be spread with different media channels. On the other hand,

identity narratives can be generated from below, which is usually the case with the oppressed, the subjugated such as minorities or the displaced (Paasi, 2009: 142).

As regions themselves are social constructs, region-building can be perceived as a process or set of different institutional and cultural practices which become a part of everyday life, consciousness and identity of region inhabitants. Narratives of regional identity are, therefore, reckoned “an important part of region-building, defining the identity of a region and mediating a (more or less) shared consciousness of it as an entity in its own right” (Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2011: 776).

Gagauz regional identity may be treated in a bottom-up (*vis-à-vis* Moldova) or top-down (if we accept Gagauzia as a separate unit in which ruling elites and decision-makers try to forge the regional identity that would suit their interests) approach, the latter being examined in this thesis.

Therefore, narrative analysis seems very helpful in providing understanding “on the cognitive process and on the role of culture in shaping any human universals” (Patterson & Monroe 1998: 315). Analysis of narrative tries to uncover ways in which a story is constructed, for whom and for what purpose. This technique helps to analyze how major actors that shape discourse in Gagauzia narrate and interpret Gagauz regional identity, especially in the context of outer geopolitical ideologies strong enough to influence the region. This way the study examines how these actors construct the Gagauz Self versus foreign Other(s), how foreign norms and values are internalized or rejected and whether this Self is ascribed into any spatial or ideological framework beyond Gagauzia.

3.2. Research design

This research is a single case study, which allows the author to provide rigorous analysis by considering specific conditions and relevant contexts of a singular phenomenon.

Gagauzia is definitely not the only sub-state unit whose regional belonging is shaped by the contest of geopolitical ideologies. However, the author found it unproductive to compare it with other cases: Russia’s Turkic autonomies, most notably Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, could have been subject to the growing Pan-Turkist influence in the 1990s; nonetheless, then this influence might have challenged Russia’s territorial

integrity, not geopolitical ideology, as the Russian world was not fully conceptualized and organized as it is now. The Russian-populated areas in Latvia and Estonia could have provided another interesting contested geopolitical field; however, these countries' EU membership and absence of any territorial framework of the Russian population make this case incompatible with Toal's model.

Therefore, demographically small and geographically peripheral, Gagauzia delivers a fascinating case for exploring the relationship between regional identity and geopolitical ideology. In other words, here the author's main aim is to examine a distinctive case, not to draw general conclusions.

3.3. Data collection process

In our case, it is important to study how the Gagauz attach meaning and significance to the key concepts, geopolitical ideology and regional identity, and how they interpret their belonging to a particular geopolitical template. These concepts are connected with narratives which construct and reconstruct identity; thus, analysis of these narratives provides valuable understanding how the Gagauz make and use stories to construct their identity (Self-Other) and define their regional belonging: how they represent themselves against the world (or other worlds / regions / geopolitical ideologies) in the contemporary context, given political, social, economic, historical and cultural factors.

Narratives are social constructs created by social actors for specific (e.g., political) goals (Subotić, 2013: 326), while Tomaney (2007: 357) further points that collective identities are invented upon discourses which heavily engage "intellectuals, cultural producers, and political leaders". Therefore, by accepting the top-down nature of regional identity, the author turns to the Gagauz elite, political, cultural and intellectual, as the major agency that plays a key role and possesses channels for influence in creating images and narratives of the region, in forming public opinion and constructing the identity.

The top-down approach necessitated the interaction with an elite group. Given the vague, broad and flexible meaning of the word 'elite', the author assumed the role of interpreting this concept, accepting it as a combination of leadership and intelligentsia, and including the following professionals into this elite group: politician, lecturer, doctor, civil activist,

journalist, film producer, poet. Therefore, the sampling process is purposive, but was facilitated through snowballing.

In order to collect data from the representatives of the Gagauz elites and understand a mirror reflection of their reality, qualitative interviewing was chosen as a major method that can help to collect and examine narrative accounts of social worlds (Miller & Glassner, 2016: 52-53, 62).

For this purpose, on February 1-18, 2019 the author participated in a fieldwork in Gagauzia to get acquainted with the natural setting through direct experience and to conduct face-to-face interaction with the interviewees. Thus, the empirical findings are derived from interview transcriptions. Moreover, the overall experience in Gagauzia helped the author to get an access to the primary sources, observe the socio-cultural environment where the narratives are formed, and understand the contextuality which have left the imprints in regional identity.

In-depth interviewing with 10 selected participants *tête-à-tête* proved to be especially a valuable method for delivering culturally embedded explanations that represent microcosms of interviewees (Miller & Glassner, 2016: 56). Face-to-face communication also provided more freedom and flexibility to both sides and enabled the interviewer to ask additional questions when necessary. Open-ended questions had been designed for the process for receiving what Magnusson & Marecek (2015: 48) name “rich talk”, a comprehensive opinion interviewees are motivated to express.

The interviews had initially been set as structured in order to carry on discussions along the same theme with each interlocutor. Thus, no deviations happened from the basic questioning order and wording, as the interviewer followed exactly what had earlier been written. Yet, in case of necessity (clarifications), additional and spin-off questions were asked like in semi-structured interviews. Follow-up questions were also available usually at the end of the interviews to understand the interviewees' views more comprehensively.

In other words, the interviews were designed and, in some cases, conducted as standardized. In others, they ended up as semi-standardized. The main goal for using standardized (structured) interviews was to maximize the flow of valid, reliable and straight information while diminishing distortions from the main line of the conversation

(Holstein & Gubrium, 2016: 69). However, switching to semi-standardized also allowed more flexibility. In some occasions the interviews might have gone a bit off-topic and beyond the scope of the subject; those parts which provided no value and meaning for the content were skipped or ignored during the analysis.

Although pre-interview conversation, as well as some remarks during the interview was made in Azerbaijani, Turkish and Gagauz (three almost mutually intelligible languages), the formal parts of the interviews were made in Russian for easy translation into English.

In the beginning each interlocutor permitted audio-recording and use of their names. Despite the initial fears that a recording device might make some interviewees nervous and/or lead to insincere responses with a more diplomatic language being preferred, all respondents handled it readily, with all the interviews having proceeded as frank conversations. The device provided verbatim records to be kept as documents and helped the author not to miss any key bits of information. Each audio-record was then transcribed and translated from Russian and partially Gagauz to English.

Almost each ending of the interview was also used for snowballing. This very technique seemed more appropriate: since regional identity is accepted as a top-down process, which is shaped and directed by political, intellectual and cultural elite, each information-rich interviewee was asked for additional relevant contact(s). Chain referral worked very well in the small Gagauz community, where everyone knows everyone.

All the interviews took place in Comrat, the capital of Gagauzia, which could seem a limitation for the process. On the other hand, it should be noted that all snowballed politicians and intellectuals needed for the interview are concentrated in Comrat, which is the political, cultural and intellectual center.

As there exists no fixed or optimal number of participants for interpretive researches (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015: 37), the author decided to work with that number of interviews he could handle to process further.

Their interviews can provide important insight into various elements of political and social life of Gagauzia, the general trends that currently prevail in Gagauz society and even some general forecasts on possible future orientation of the autonomy. Combination

of data collected through interview may shed light on and deliver important understanding of being Gagauz in such a complicated region.

Other textual materials, scholarly articles on Gagauzia, official documents on and of Gagauzia, daily news from Gagauzia (by using websites such as gagauzinfo.md, gagauz.md, sabaa.md), as well as statistical figures from official sources and media also enabled the author to understand Gagauzia better and provided supplementary data for the general analysis.

3.4. Data analysis method

The analysis was carried out within a constructivist framework and with understanding that each member of society constantly constructs their world and attaches meaning to different constructs based on assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and hence develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Narrative approach is employed in this thesis, as it is crucial in constructing a meaning of purpose and place for both individuals and collectives. The shared stories of a culture provide grounds for common understandings and interpretation (Patterson & Monroe 1998: 321; Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2011: 778).

The narrative analysis started with the verbatim transcription of the interviews, as well as their translation from Russian to English. The data were familiarized through multiple reading.

As each answer in the interviews suits a particular topic (Gagauz identity, Turkey, EU, Russia, Moldova), categorizing them was not difficult. To visualize the geopolitical ideology topic, the following categories are offered by the author:

- The role of geopolitical ideology: whether the certain ideology is constructed as an advantage or threat;
- Channels of influence: which ways geopolitical ideology uses to penetrate into Gagauzia and Gagauz minds;
- Local expectations: what the Gagauz narrative expects from geopolitical ideology.

To map the external geopolitical influence, the author uses the following table (*Table 2*) as a template:

Table 2. “Geopolitical ideology in Gagauzia” template

Role	Opportunity
	Threat
Channels of influence	
Local expectations	

4. Background information on Gagauzia

4.1. History of the Gagauz people

The origins of the Gagauz people, not clarified yet, are still subject to different theories and debates. The major theories consider that the Gagauz can be descendants of Seljuks, Kipchaks (Cuman), Oghuz, Pechenegs or the synthesis of all of them (Menz, 2007: 123-124). The ethnogenesis started in the 11th century, when the wave of Pechenegs and Oghuz Turks moved into the Balkans, mainly Dobruja, and was heavily influenced by advance of the Ottoman Turks in the 14th century (Angeli, 2007). By 1417 the Turks had completed the occupation of Dobruja, which was transformed into an Ottoman *sancak*. Between the 15th and 19th centuries the Ottoman authorities did not distinguish the Gagauz from other ethnic groups (Angeli, 2007).

The ethnonym ‘Gagauz’ was not found in written sources until the early 19th century, when the modern history of the community started. Although the migration of the Gagauz into the Russian domains kicked off as early as 1768-1774 (Kapaló, 2011: 49), the 1812 Treaty of Bucharest that ended Russian-Turkish War accelerated this process, by allowing the Christian subjects of the Ottoman state to move to Russia. In 1812, new colonists, including the Gagauz relocated from eastern Bulgaria to Bessarabia and Budjak (Angeli, 2007; Bitkova, 2015: 56).

The first attempts to raise national consciousness and identity among the Gagauz are associated with priest Mihail Çakir, who in the early 20th century published books and first newspaper in Gagauz (Karanfil, 2013: 110) and translated the entire Orthodox canon into Gagauz. Therefore, Çakir is hailed not only as the great educator and enlightener in Gagauz history, but also as the founding father of this small community (Kapaló, 2010: 6; 2011: 70, 72).

The Russian revolution of 1905-1907 reached Bessarabia and led to a local uprising, which culminated with the declaration of the Republic of Comrat in January 1906. The self-proclaimed autonomy survived only 5 days, as the Russian troops quickly oppressed the insurrection (Tufar et al., 2015). The proclamation was rather symbolic response to the Russian authorities and did not imply any nationalistic state.

The end of the First World War heralded in Bessarabia the Romanian era, during which the conditions of national minorities, including Gagauz worsened as the authorities conducted the policy of Romanianization, especially through education system in the 1920-1930s. However, the school attendance continued to be very low in Bessarabia, perhaps as a protest of national minorities, including Gagauz against Romania's assimilation efforts (Wöber, 2013: 8). As a result, the Gagauz were among the least educated and impoverished groups in Moldova during the said period (Katchanovski, 2005: 890). Thus, the Romanian rule is usually associated with oppression and corruption in Gagauz memory (Demirdirek, 2000: 67).

Under Ion Antonescu, the Romanian government even considered the deportation of all non-Romanians from the region. A 1942 official governmental report designated the Gagauz, alongside other ethnic minorities, as an alien component that represented a great threat to Romanian culture and defense. Another plan regarding the Gagauz was even to transfer them to Turkey (Kapaló, 2011: 72-73). The afore-told plans were never materialized as the Soviets captured Bessarabia first in 1940, then again in 1944. The area incorporated into the Soviet Union was divided between the newly formed Moldavian SSR and Ukrainian SSR. Such a decision also divided the Gagauz ethnic group, as some of them found themselves within the Moldavian SSR, some within the Ukrainian SSR.

The end of the Second World War did not, however, bring peace to Gagauzia. Many Gagauz, as part of labor mobilization, were forcefully sent to Donbas mines and other industrial centers of the USSR. Plus, the economic policy introduced in post-war Moldavia led to famine in 1946-1947, when some 150,000-200,000 lost their lives (Angeli, 2007). The mass deportation of the Gagauz to Siberia took place in 1949. Many of the deported could return only after Stalin's death around 1957 (Karanfil, 2016). Yet, these tragic experiences, especially mass starvation, did not translate the political culture of the Gagauz into an anti-Soviet or anti-Russian one like in the neighbouring Ukraine (Katchanovski, 2005: 890). Instead, the Soviet period is still remembered with generally favourable impression (Demirdirek, 2000: 67).

The post-war period did also deliver some positive changes for the Gagauz, especially in terms of modernization and mass literacy. Remarkable event were the introduction of the Cyrillic-based Gagauz script and the inclusion of the Gagauz language in the school

curriculum in the 1950s. This move necessitated and generated first textbooks in Gagauz and gave a strong impetus to the Gagauz written literature (Shornikov, 2009). However, the practice was soon discontinued in 1961-1962 allegedly after complaints of many Gagauz parents who wanted to preserve Russian as the key language at schools (Schlegel, 2018: 12-13). The Soviet period thereby led to mass Russification in this region (Chinn & Roper, 1998: 90-92; Wöber, 2013: 8).

4.2. Gagauz self-governance in Moldova

Initially an intellectual movement, Gagauz nationalism received a strong push with the *Perestroika* changes. In 1986, teaching of Gagauz was partially restored at schools. The first Gagauz paper *Ana Sözü* launched two years later became a momentum for the Gagauz culture and offered a tribune for local intellectuals. The Gagauz national awakening strengthened when Moldovan (identical to Romanian¹⁴) was accepted as Moldova's official language in August 1989 and the unionist groups lobbied unification with Romania. Moldova's national minorities became very concerned about such developments (Donaj & Grishin, 2015: 48; Kosienkowski, 2017b: 118; Topal, 2013).

As a result, the Gagauz national movement organized a congress of Gagauz deputies in August 1990 and announced about independence from Moldova, the decision to establish their own state, the desire to keep their Soviet citizenship and not to accept Moldovan citizenship, the election for Gagauz Supreme Soviet (Angeli, 2006: 63-64). In other words, the Gagauz Republic was proclaimed as a state separate from Moldova but subject only to the Soviet authority (Kosienkowski, 2017a: 293), thus becoming Eurasia's first *de facto* state (Kosienkowski, 2017b: 116). As stated during the congress, the Gagauz movement was not nationalistic; it was designed to enable the Gagauz to survive and live together with other ethnic groups (Shornikov, 2009). A couple of weeks later a similar quasi-independent Transnistrian state was also proclaimed in Tiraspol (Topal, 2013).

The decision on Gagauz autonomy was soon annulled by Chişinău as unconstitutional. To suppress the tendency in the region, Moldovan Prime Minister Mircea Druc initiated

¹⁴ Whether Moldovan is a separate idiom or a dialect of the Romanian language used in Moldova has a long history of debates. This linguistic issue is part of a greater controversial question, Moldovan identity.

in October 1990 what became known as *March to Gagauzia*: tens of thousands Moldovan nationalists proceeded to Gagauzia (Düver, 2009). Counter-mobilization kicked off in the region, where locals decided to defend themselves mainly with rebars and other improvised means. Human support came from Transnistria. The Russian troops stationed nearby also arrived in the region, rolling their tanks across Gagauzia and preventing bloodshed (Topal, 2013; Zabarah, 2012: 187). The tensions that lasted several days threatened Moldova with a civil war. Although the situation did not escalate into a conflict, it accelerated pro-autonomy processes in Gagauzia.

The Soviet authorities also attempted to regulate the troubled situation in Moldova: in November 1990, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev assembled Moldovan, Gagauz and Transnistrian leaders. A month later he issued a decree to normalize the situation in Moldova, which virtually abolished the Gagauz Republic in exchange of some compromises from the Moldovan side (Kendighelean, 2009).

Towards the end of the year, the Gagauz Republic held its presidential elections and elected Stepan Topal for the top office (Angeli, 2007; Topal, 2013). Alongside state symbols (flag, coat of arms and national anthem), a bank, a university and even a self-defence battalion were formed in the entity (Kosienkowski, 2017a: 300). These events marked the beginning of the modern Gagauz statehood, which from 1990 to 1994 existed as the unrecognized Gagauz Republic. Fortunately, Gagauzia did not become a bloody battlefield as happened in Transnistria following Moldova's independence.

According to Chinn & Roper (1998: 95), Kosienkowski (2017a: 304, 308) and Zabarah (2012: 183, 190), the Gagauz state formation did not follow the path of Transnistria for several reasons: firstly, both the leaders and the populace in Gagauzia remained relatively unmobilized, while nationalist myths and symbols that could embody Gagauz identity were weak; secondly, the 14th Army secured Russia's direct presence and influence in Tiraspol; thirdly, unlike the agriculturally-based economy of Gagauzia, Transnistria, due to its industrial facilities, had always been more closely linked to Moscow. Moreover, the absence of a patron state did not provide full support to Gagauz independence: Russia focused on Transnistria, while Turkey was in favour of Moldova's territorial integrity. In those conditions, as Kosienkowski (2017a: 294) explains, the Gagauz leadership endorsed

autonomy or broad self-governance, not full and internationally recognized independence from the parent state.

Therefore, unlike the Transnistrian case, the Gagauz problem was solved after numerous meetings between Chişinău and Comrat. As a result, in December 1994, the Parliament of Moldova passed the Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri), awarding the Gagauz with territorial autonomy within Moldova and devolving control of some political, cultural and economic issues to the entity.

One of the major provisions of the document, Article 1.4. reads that in the event of a change in the status of sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Moldova, the people of Gagauzia possess the right to external self-determination. This clause was motivated in the 1990s by the popular narrative of a united Romanian-Moldovan state, of which the Gagauz historically had a negative collective memory (Wöber, 2013: 9, 12).

Gagauz, Russian and Moldovan were accepted as official languages, with the latter two, especially Russian set for administrative purposes, according to Article 3.

As stipulated by the Autonomy Law, the region is headed by *Başkan* (Governor), the head of executive power, who is elected for a four-year term, as are the deputies of the local assembly, *Halk Topluşu*. According to the document, the *Başkan* must speak Gagauz and is also a member *ex officio* of the Moldovan government.

The Statute set in motion a series of events in 1995, especially regarding the administrative look of the entity: the March referendum incorporated three cities and several communes into the Autonomous Gagauz Territory and determined its boundaries (Chinn & Roper, 1998: 99; Wöber, 2013: 12).

What makes the settlement of the Gagauz problem not only successful, but also exemplary is that it was achieved directly by conflict sides without any third-party mediation. Yet Angeli (2007) and Topal (2013) point to the positive role of Turkey's president Süleyman Demirel in the peaceful and prompt solution of the Gagauz conflict.

By the time of its adoption, the 1994 Gagauz Autonomy Law seemed more liberal even for European standards and concerned some European countries that had ethnic minorities. Romania was especially critical of the document, "fearing an atomization of

Moldova” and that parallel claims might emerge by Romania’s ethnic minorities, too (Schlegel, 2018: 9).

Since 1994 boundaries between the regional and central competences have been blurry and not clarified up to date, while Gagauzia’s scope of self-governance has been allegedly reduced over the years (Protsyk & Rigamonti, 2007: 8-9).

The Kozak memorandum designed in late 2003 during the Transnistria negotiations but never materialized proposed a Moldovan federation with both Transnistria and Gagauzia as federal subjects with broader rights, such as acquiring membership in international organizations, concluding international treaties and establishing representations abroad (Berg, 2007: 214-215).

4.3. Current situation of Gagauzia

After Moldova signed the Association Agreement with the EU in November 2013, the Gagauz authorities initiated a referendum to display their preferences.

Organized on February 2, 2014, in light of escalating violence in neighbouring Ukraine, the referendum was considered illegal by the Chişinău (Coffey, 2015) but was supported by an overwhelming majority of the electorate as the voter turnout was over 70 per cent: 98.4 per cent of voters favored the Russian-led Customs Union, and 97.2 per cent voted against closer EU integration. A similar figure (98 per cent) reasserted Gagauzia’s right to self-determination once the political status of the Republic of Moldova changes¹⁵.

Thus, Article 1.4. of the 1994 Autonomy law was charged with a new dimension: the provision is not only aimed at Moldova’s hypothetical reunification with Romania, but at Moldova’s membership of the EU now.

According to Donaj and Grishin (2015: 52), the main reasons for this unambiguous result of the referendum could be explained by a set of reasons: traditional pro-Russianness of local inhabitants; fear of potential unification of Moldova and Romania; concern for

¹⁵ Preliminary results of a referendum on February 2, 2014 in Gagauzia (in Russian). February 3, 2014. Accessed on May 10, 2019. <http://www.gagauzia.md/newsview.php?l=ru&idc=390&id=4790>

decline in trade with Russia and for restrictions in access to the vital Russian labor market; lack of awareness on the EU and on the conditions of European integration.

While the legal issues around the referendum can be subject to debates, Gagauzia's message, albeit symbolic, to Chişinău, Brussels, and Moscow was clear: the autonomy reserves the right to display its geopolitical orientation (Kosienkowski, 2017a; Schlegel, 2018: 19). Gagauzia, which can "weaken Moldova's European perspective" (Schwartz, 2015) was, therefore, called "a bone in Moldova's throat" (Haines, 2016). But as Donaj & Grishin (2015: 52) explain, even if Moldova continues to go westward, Gagauzia has no power or resources to protest it. A real secession (backed by an outside force) may, however, change the situation. Thus, Rinna (2014) predicts that Gagauzia will likely turn into a focal point in the emerging geopolitical struggle for Moldova.

The 2014 referendum whose result displayed pro-Russian sentiments in Gagauzia is taken as a benchmark. This thesis aims to analyse the post-referendum developments in order to look into how the interested geopolitical ideologies have been active in Gagauzia and how the Gagauz perception of three geopolitical ideologies have evolved since 2014.

5. Analysis

5.1. Contemporary Gagauz identity

This sub-chapter tries to shed light on what it means being Gagauz at present and which elements constitute Gagauz identity. The relevant question in this regard asked the interviewees about the current situation of the Gagauz language (and culture).

The evaluation on the Gagauz language by almost all respondents is very pessimistic. While discussing the problem, the author heard from his interlocutors such phrasings as “not developed” (Sirkeli, 2019), “degradation” (Patraman, 2019), “catastrophic” (Zanet, 2019), “tragic” and “historic loss” (Dobrov, 2019).

Despite and during the autonomy, the situation has aggravated. Although the expectations for developing the Gagauz language and culture were quite high at the beginning of national movement and self-governance (Dobrov, 2019), currently “the Gagauz language and culture receive very few input” (Sirkeli, 2019).

During the intensive Soviet-era Russification of Gagauz cities, the countryside was more resistant to this phenomenon (Dobrov, 2019). More intensively used and preserved at least as a folk language in the Soviet period, Gagauz has intensively been losing even its vernacularity. Home and streets, once the main places that kept Gagauz alive, are rapidly turning into Russophone as well. So are the rural areas, where kindergartens and schools employ only Russian to bring up younger generations.

There exist no kindergartens or schools with Gagauz as the main language of instruction. Rather, it is taught several hours per week, like a foreign language. The Russian-language kindergartens and the current trend of parent-child communication in Russian raise concerns that the coming generations might not be able to properly master the Gagauz idiom, further risking its existence and hurting the Gagauz identity.

Therefore, Kissa (2019) and Dobrov (2019) already speak about “disappearance” of the Gagauz language.

In fact, the language is vanishing, to be honest. Because, as you see, we all speak Russian here. This mentality is left from the Soviet Union: it did not provide a platform to study the Gagauz language, which was learned at home as a rule. For

example, I learned it at home with my grandfather. My son speaks Gagauz badly. He practically does not speak Gagauz, rather understands. (Kissa, 2019)

Moreover, spoken Gagauz is further damaged due to lots of loanwords from other neighboring languages, a problem voiced by one of the interviewees.

We did not know many [native] words... And this is why, we managed to get such a distorted language, in which 2-3 words are Gagauz, 2-3 Russian, one Moldovan... That is, it has become such a distorted language. (Dragoy, 2019)

That Gagauz has been registered by UNESCO as an endangered language is known in the region and was mentioned by Patraman (2019) and Taushanji (2019). Supposed to alert the ethnic Gagauz, this status, however, has not been properly coped with over the years. Dobrov (2019) puts the responsibility for the situation on the Russified intelligentsia and pro-Russian politicians who would employ only Russian for all spheres.

The state of the Gagauz tongue has been worsening parallel to and due to the dominance of the Russian language. In fact, the latter is among the main three elements of the Gagauz identity, according to Sirkeli (2019), the other two being Gagauz ethnicity and Orthodoxy. He further argues that defending the right for the Russian language was one of the founding components for Gagauz autonomy.

The Gagauz autonomy in its current form was created not only to protect the Gagauz language and Gagauz culture... it was established to defend the Russian-speaking status of the Gagauz. (Sirkeli, 2019)

Only recently the regional authorities, however, stepped in to bring about some changes. In other words, once developed as a folk language without proper intellectual development, Gagauz is currently handled in a top-down manner. As the members of *Halk Topluşu*, Kissa (2019), Dragoy (2019) and Jekova (2019) informed about a recent legislative attempt to save the language. In order to cultivate the mother tongue, the Gagauz officials introduce it to a kindergarten level. The experiment is designed to resist the aging of the Gagauz language and to encourage the younger generation to learn it.

Gagauz identity is also tightly associated with the current territorial autonomy. It was not only the Gagauz identity that fostered self-governance; the inverse process has also been happening with the autonomy forging Gagauzness. But the autonomy's present situation

is also questioned by several respondents, including Zanet (2019) and Jekova (2019). Especially the latter expressed her concern over the alleged reduction of Gagauzia's competences over the years against the backdrop of the absence of boundaries between central (Chişinău) and regional authorities (Comrat).

The way how autonomy was achieved is an important mythmaking about Gagauz uniqueness. It is proudly stated (Sirkeli, 2019) that the Gagauz case was probably the only conflict in the post-Soviet space that was solved peacefully. This accomplishment is also remarkable due to the absence of any intermediaries. This is why, ex-*Başkan* Formuzal once noted that “Gagauzia's experience in conflict solution is an example for other countries”, referring particularly to other territorial conflicts in the post-Soviet space¹⁶.

Romanophobia can also be considered a part of contemporary Gagauz identity. Sirkeli (2019) explains how the Romanian rule has left traces in Gagauz collective memory. But the Soviet propaganda did also play an active role in constructing the negative Romanian image. Having resurfaced in the late 1980s, when the unionist sentiments grew in Moldova, this antipathy has transcended into the present and been reconstructed in the current realities:

The old phobia about “the Romanian gendarme” played again. The Soviet Union worked very well with its propaganda to form the image of the Romanians as fascists. And people began to fear what the Soviet period had cultivated: all these horror stories and legends about the Romanian period, when we were considered second-class people, when gendarmes beat us, etc. And they [the Soviet Union] managed to convince [the Gagauz] of it. People prefer not to talk how we were starved by the Soviets in 1946-1947. But minor stories that we were beaten at school to make us study well were turned into a whole tragedy. (Sirkeli, 2019)

The local narrative refers to the period between 1918 and 1940 as the “Romanian occupation” (during which Romanian fascists under marshal Antonescu planned to annihilate and assimilate the Gagauz) and contraposes it versus “Soviet liberation”¹⁷.

¹⁶ Экс-башган: опыт Гагаузии в решении конфликта - пример для стран (in Russian). October 15, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2019. <https://az.sputniknews.ru/expert/20171015/412329489/gagauzija-narod-azerbajdzhan-moldova-konflikt.html>

¹⁷ Gagauz Resist Moldova's Embrace of West. January 3, 2018. Accessed on April 23, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/01/03/gagauz-resist-moldova-s-embrace-of-west-01-01-2018-1/>

The Soviet nostalgia, another integral element of contemporary Gagauzness, is not only a purely psychological and mental construct in our case: within the autonomy, it is a visible and tangible phenomenon. The major street in the capital town still holds the name of Lenin, despite the weak attempts and calls to rename it. The monument to Lenin still stands firmly in the same street and in front of the government building that houses both *Başkan*'s office and regional assembly. Memorials dedicated to the Great Patriotic War and Afghanistan War can be found in many places across Gagauzia. The 22 June events¹⁸ and 9 May celebrations have been organized here in a solemn manner featuring Russian-style Immortal Regiment and St. George ribbons in recent years^{19 20}.

The collective memory in Gagauzia has a positive image of the Soviet period, which is characterized with “stability and cheaper prices” (Jekova, 2019) and when people had no uncertainty about tomorrow. This nostalgia has become sharper especially when contrasting today's realities:

There are some people, especially the elderly, who consider themselves part of the Soviet Union. They would want to return there as nostalgia is very strong. Because the memories of stability are very strong. After the 1990s, we entered a very unstable period. Therefore, it is well reflected on the condition of people. And the nostalgic past of fairly solid stability still serves as a strong link for them. Therefore, there is a portion of people that really wants to feel part of the Soviet Union. (Ibrishim, 2019)

The poor development of Gagauz identity and of the Gagauz autonomy likewise is partly explained with the absence of national idea.

National idea, which would cover the basic directions of the life of this autonomy, has not been formulated by politicians over the past years. This mission, this most important task has not been formed; thus, unfortunately, we have no national idea today. The rest of the problems stems from it... We do not have elementary

¹⁸ Руководство Гагаузии почтило память павших в Великой Отечественной войне солдат (in Russian). June 22, 2015. Accessed on April 23, 2019. <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=18916>

¹⁹ Жители Вулканешт отметили 9 мая Маршем Победы и акцией «Бессмертный полк» (in Russian). May 9, 2017. Accessed on April 23, 2019. <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=32878>

²⁰ НТВ Молдова: тысячи жителей Гагаузии отметили День победы (in Russian). May 10, 2018. Accessed on April 23, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGj_KILT7IQ

managerial priorities: how, where to go, what for and what will we do? In educational, in cultural, language policies and so on. (Jekova, 2019)

Different influences are seen rather as opportunities and possibilities that shape multi-layered Gagauz identity. Interaction with and belonging to several realms can contribute to enrich this identity and forge the national idea. As Patraman (2019) offers trilingual (Gagauz, Russian and Moldovan) education at school could comprehensively develop a younger generation. A double nature (Turkic and Russophone), if transformed into trilingual, which seems currently almost impossible in the face of economic poverty and with only a limited degree of autonomy, would further make Gagauzia a unique region and stimulate a geopolitical confrontation over it more.

5.2. Gagauzia and the Russian world

The Russian world is represented in general and in Gagauz context by the Russian Federation, the gravitational center of this geopolitical framework. In Toal's model, Russia suits the metropolitan state category, which is eager to restore hegemony over its former territories by offering the Russian world concept.

As noted by Sirkeli (2019), the Gagauz generally perceive Russianness as an advantage. He earlier mentioned how defending the Russian language was one of the core claims for autonomy. Even today, Sirkeli (2019) says that "pro-Russian hysteria is present" in Gagauzia. Meanwhile, Kissa (2019) names this advantage "friendship", by referring to Gagauz-Russian relations as "fraternal" and "friendly".

Among the channels of this influence comes the Russian language first. The underdevelopment of the mother tongue and the heavy Russification both during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, as well as Russian's status as a *lingua franca* in this ethnically diverse region have turned almost the entire Gagauz population into Russophone. In the territory of the Gagauz autonomy, the Russian language is present and dominant at all levels and in all spheres. That almost all signs (traffic signs, shops, advertisements, monuments) are in Russian were witnessed by the author himself during the field trip to Gagauzia. The Russian language is used in all offices across the autonomy as officials prefer both oral Russian for communication and written Russian for

documentation. The official website of the Gagauz government opens by default in Russian, which also contains complete information, although Gagauz, English and Romanian versions are also available but usually have partial and poorly translated data. Main information portals (gagauzinfo.md, gagauz.md, sabaa.md), as well as *Başkan* Irina Vlah's webpage also present the entire material in Russian.

The dominance of the Russian language may be evaluated in a positive light; because practically, it provides an opportunity for the Gagauz to the pool of information and access to the Russian labor market.

Russian influence remained here after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian language is also preserved [here]. Everyone is Russia-oriented. Russian is a very rich language and it is very cool that our people speak this language.
(Patraman, 2019)

The omnipresence of the Russian language creates a good platform for Russian media's penetration into and domination in the region as well. This media constructs an "impact on people's minds and moods" (Sirkeli, 2019) and is, first and foremost, about television channels "which enjoy unhindered broadcasting here" (Sirkeli, 2019).

Probably the main reason is that we all speak 100% Russian. All the mass media which we obtain information from, everything is in Russian... And this propaganda influences thinking. (Dobrov, 2019)

Currently, Russian propaganda is furthered also on social media. Russian social networks such as V Kontakte and Odnoklassniki are quite popular in the region, while Yandex is a preferred Russian search engine, as the author himself noted in several cases during his communications in Gagauzia.

Not only TV channels... We should not exclude the role of social media. And social media contains a huge amount of pro-Russian accounts, bots, trolls that do their work... Russian media, Russian propaganda, we must admit, is quite strong in this.
(Sirkeli, 2019)

Interestingly enough, the influence of Orthodoxy is not underlined by any respondent. Only after an additional question, Sirkeli (2019) and Dragoy (2019) confirmed the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which Gagauz Orthodoxy, as well as the

Moldovan Orthodoxy, is subordinate to. Yet, neither of the interviewees developed this idea further. The author suggests that this situation could be related to the facts that Orthodox influence may be invisibly embedded into daily lives and/or the Russian party may not be quite active in the Gagauz direction at present.

The previous sub-chapter already explains Soviet legacy, which is quite alive in Gagauzia. Shared history and Soviet nostalgia both transcend into and fuel pro-Russian sentiments in the region. This legacy does not only reflect and construct the Soviet period as a time of prosperity and stability; it is also based on personal memories.

You see, after all, we have a common history. For example, I grew up in the Soviet Union. When Moldova was formed I was already 10 years old. I remember kopeks, I remember rubles. It is left from there. (Kissa, 2019)

As the Soviet Union was associated with social and economic advancement, as well as peaceful inter-ethnic relations, the Gagauz were reluctant to leave the USSR and did not welcome its downfall. This positive image may take its roots even from the pre-Soviet times: in collective memory Russian friendship dates back to the turn of the 18th century, when the Christian Gagauz found asylum in the Orthodox Russian state, where they were provided with lands and privileges, including tax and military service exemption.

Dragoy (2019) also confirms that a “red” Gagauzia still likes to link itself with Russia. While the Romanian period has been memorized as a negative experience, the Russian / Soviet tragedies are either skipped or not constructed as such: hence, in these contexts, forgetting is a usual trend and preferred to remembrance.

The Russian influence has always been and remains a very large influence on the Gagauz, on the minds. Despite the fact that it was in the Soviet Union, in 1946-1947, when the artificial famine was created in Moldova; most people died in the south. According to some data, up to 50% of the population passed away. Despite this tragedy, it is surprising that, even those who were expelled and returned, their children, they all praise the Soviet Union, Soviet power, Communist ideology, Lenin, Leninism, etc. (Dobrov, 2019)

Avoiding any negatory memory about the Soviet period is not only related to Soviet nostalgia. Fearing Russia or fearing to lose Russia`s friendship also blocks such initiatives.

My colleague and I initiated a draft on designating a special Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Famine. And what was the reaction? Terrible. Why? Because we cannot quarrel with Russia. “You offer it because you want to embroil us with Russia,” some said. And we cannot quarrel with Russia in any way. (Jekova, 2019)

Having covered several channels of the Russian influence, which also correspond to four key parameters that construct Russianness, this thesis can refer to the Russianness table again (see Table 3):

Table 3. Gagauz according to Russianness parameters

Parameters of Russianness	Ethnic Russians in the Near Abroad	Non-Russian former Soviet citizens	Global Russians
Russian language	Yes	Yes	Yes
Russian ethnicity	Yes	No	Irrelevant
Orthodox Church	Yes	Yes	Yes
Soviet legacy	Yes	Yes	Irrelevant

In other words, the Gagauz, although ethnically non-Russian, contain other important elements of Russianness constructed by the Russian world ideology: Russian language, Orthodoxy and Soviet heritage.

The afore-mentioned parameters, as well as big opportunities in a vast territory, have also set Russia as the major destination for Gagauz emigration fostered by the poor economic situation in the autonomy. The frequent contacts with and the remittances from Russia

not only contribute to daily lives of the Gagauz (as well as the of the whole autonomy) financially, but also strengthen the overall pro-Russian sympathy.

Russia continues to remain an important and huge market for Gagauz products, mainly agricultural and viticultural. Even when Russia banned some Moldovan imports in response to Moldova's EU Association Agreement, Gagauzia received privileges and permission to bypass these restrictions, a fact acknowledged by Patraman (2019).

Another respondent, Todur Zanet (2019), brings to scene politicians as one of the channels. According to him, Russian influence or threat is constructed and/or transmitted by local political figures, who like to use the Russian factor for their own dividends. Despite fueling and skillfully using the pro-Russian sentiments inside Gagauzia, they do, however, cooperate with and eagerly accept financial aid from other centers of power.

The image of Russia can also be cemented by the prestige of Russian political leaders, especially Vladimir Putin, who is respected here a lot, although he may be criticized in his own country:

On the Internet, sometimes I see that they don't like Putin in Moscow or in St. Petersburg, that there are many opposition forces in Russia. If you raise such an issue before the Gagauz, there would be no question at all. Here, people are just fond of him. That is, Russia's influence here is still dominant. (Dobrov, 2019)

Personification of Russian leader(s) with Russia itself not only stems from domination of the Russian influence but strengthens this influence as well. This concept can further be confirmed by the “photo with a Russian leader” narrative prevalent in Gagauzia. According to this well-spread stereotype, “a photo with Putin can bring manifold dividends” (Jekova, 2019) to a local politician. The author himself heard this idea from various persons during off-record and informal conversations in Comrat and in Chişinău.

Indeed, billboards and slogans that promote stronger ties with Russia allegedly contributed a lot to the election of the incumbent Başkan Irina Vlah in 2015. Over the years, the information on her meetings with Russian leadership, photos of her handshakes with Putin and other Russian officials are believed to add capital into her popularity. Referring back to the idea above, the pro-Russian sentiments are constructed and

strengthened by the local ruling elite (by using “Russia is our strategic partner”-type slogans) and masterly manipulated for political gains.

Despite Gagauzia`s being and wanting a pro-Russian platform, Russia in her turn does not provide any substantial aid to keep or (re-)integrate this corner into the Russian world. In reference to (much expected) Russian assistance, almost all the interlocutors would use such terms as “none”, “words only”, “insignificant”, “minor”, which include “hearing aids, second-hand cars” (Sirkeli, 2019), “books” (Zanet, 2019), “Bible in Gagauz” (Dragoy, 2019). This assistance seems miserable especially when comparing with the input that comes from other sources of power, namely Turkey and the EU.

Although by and large there is not much help from there [Russia]. If you compare it with that of Turkey... Look how much Turkey helps. (Kissa, 2019)

According to the official data, between 2016-2018 Gagauzia was a recipient of Russia`s humanitarian aid worth 25 million Moldovan leu²¹ (approximately 1.25 million euro); it was almost three times less than European assistance in 2016. Russian assistance included mainly agricultural technology, vehicles, medial and sports equipment^{22 23}. A big portion of financial aid was used to purchase books for school libraries and to provide stipends for students. Moreover, Gagauzia gained a quota of free operations for ten people in Russian hospitals²⁴.

While substantial help comes from other sources, Gagauzia undergoes the “free of charge” Russification (Dobrov, 2019). Such a situation irritates some of the interviewees, one of whom (Dragoy, 2019) used Medvedev`s catchphrase “There is no money, but you hold on”²⁵ in order to explain Russia`s attitude to the region.

²¹ Вадим Чебан - Корнелу Дуднику: Россия инвестировала в Гагаузию не 20 евро, а 25 миллионов леев (in Russian). January 31, 2019. Accessed on April 23, 2019.

<http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=45005>

²² Санкт-Петербург передал Гагаузии гуманитарную помощь стоимостью в 10 миллионов леев (in Russian). February 13, 2016. Accessed on April 23, 2019.

<http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=23317>

²³ Итоги социально-экономического развития АТО Гагаузии, 2016 (in Russian). Accessed on April 22, 2019. <https://investgagauzia.md/itogi-sots-ekon-razvitiya/>

²⁴ Сердцу не прикажешь: как пророссийски настроенная автономия в составе Молдовы изо всех сил пытается не замечать ЕС (in Russian). March 19, 2018. Accessed on April 22, 2019.

<http://www.zdg.md/ru/?p=18148>

²⁵ Медведев пенсионерам в Крыму: денег нет, но вы держитесь (in Russian). May 24, 2016. Accessed on May 9, 2019. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27754387.html>

The pro-Russian Gagauz eagerly expected to catch any attention of Russia particularly in the aftermath of the 2014 referendum. In general, the historic event is not only a benchmark for the Gagauz that reflected their position, but also a reference point for multiple contexts.

And what is the most surprising? It turned out that the Russian Federation did not respond. It even very faintly highlighted [the referendum] in its information resources... Just once or twice on the central channels. (Patraman, 2019)

Poor reaction from Russia was followed by poor actions. The pro-Russian choice of people was not repaid. Obviously, almost nothing has changed in Russia's attitude towards the region: humanitarian and financial assistance, trade, cooperation has remained almost the same and not increased since the referendum. Even if some actions have been done, they are not so visible and have not produced any tangible results.

Russia would send some humanitarian aid even before [the referendum], and it has continued to act the same way [afterwards]. No tight cooperation, which media or officials had announced has happened... [The authorities claim that] they have concluded 50 agreements. But the life of people is not improving. If the economy is growing, who benefits from it? Maybe there are some entrepreneurs who export fruits [to Russia]. But I do not see that the life of an average man has improved by the agreements signed with Russia. (Patraman, 2019)

The opinion of another respondent in this regard is sharp and more straightforward:

Russia does not need Gagauzia at all. The main thing Russia needs is Transnistria. And it [Russia] has taken it. (Zanet, 2019)

During her visit to Moscow in October 2017, Irina Vlah met with the representatives of the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Rossotrudnichestvo and asked for more aid, especially in the sphere of education in terms of equipment, textbooks²⁶. It seems that Russia started

²⁶ Фонд «Русский мир» и Россотрудничество активизируют сотрудничество с Гагаузией (in Russian). October 24, 2017. Accessed on April 23, 2019. <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=36250>

to activate its activities in Gagauzia (and Transnistria). The most recent information in April 2019: Rossotrudnichestvo agreed to soon open a contact point in Gagauzia²⁷.

In another set of views, Russian influence is seen or understood as a threat. These views are, however, presented rather as a divisive phenomenon within the society: educated versus uneducated, urban versus rural. Moreover, the Russian threat is constructed through the historical prism, by referring to the bitter experience of the past usually unsaid and avoided by the contemporary generation.

People less educated or from rural areas feel it as an advantage. The more educated ones opine vice versa and recall, for example, the 1947-1947, from which many, including myself suffered. (Taushanji, 2019)

While Gagauz emigration to and remittances from Russia have already been explained as one of the pillars of the Russian influence in Gagauzia, they can also bring negative experience as well.

Many people return from Russia and shout that they will never go there again. Just like my relative, who had lived there for 18-20 years and had his own business. But he got stripped so badly there that he came back with nothing. For him, the words 'Russia', 'Putin' sound so abusive today. (Dragoy, 2019)

Although the stories like the one above narrate personal experience and may probably not be generalized, they can still refer to the values (or lack of the values), as well as the level of development Russia represents for the Gagauz.

At the same time, a neutral stance to the Russian influence is also available:

In general, Russia`s influence at the moment is very strong. This is neither good nor bad. It [Russia`s influence] is just present. (Patraman, 2019)

Yet, he is also against labelling this influence as a threat, again by pointing to historical connections and friendly relations.

²⁷ Наверстать упущенное: Россотрудничество открывает филиалы в Гагаузии и Приднестровье (in Russian). April 14, 2019. Accessed on April 23, 2019. <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=46317>

Of course, no one feels a threat. Because there is none. And because historically Russia has been friendly to us. Especially over the last historical period. Since the 1970s. (Patraman, 2019)

By the end of this sub-chapter, the template offered by the author as the map of Russian influence may take the following form (*Table 4*):

Table 4. Russian world in Gagauzia

Role	Opportunity Fraternity and friendship Historical connections (czarist- and Soviet-era positive memory)
	Threat Uneducated masses (as a receiver of Russian influence) Historical experience (famine, deportation)
Channels of influence	Russian language Russian Orthodox Church Shared history / Soviet nostalgia Mass media and social media Local and Russian politicians Migrant workers and remittance
Local expectations	More attention from Russia Closer cooperation Proper aid

5.3. Gagauzia and Pan-Turkism

As this sub-chapter examines Gagauzia *vis-à-vis* Pan-Turkism, the latter is scrutinized and understood as mainly Turkish influence, given that Turkey is currently the main actor and driver of the Turkic ideology and geographically near Gagauzia. Therefore, in this part Turkey also represents Turkic influence and fits Toal's kin power category.

Ethno-linguistic kinship is the basis for the present Gagauz-Turkish relations. Both belong to the Oghuz branch of the Turkic family, which make them, along with Azerbaijani and Turkmen also, mutually intelligible to some extent. Therefore, the Gagauz-Turkish ties are based, first and foremost, on their Turkic nature.

I always say that I can speak with the Turks... Our languages are identical, not 100%. But 70% can be spoken and understood. (Kissa, 2019)

Many history books and museums (e.g., Comrat and Beşalma museums, which the author himself visited), too, report about the Turkic origin of the Gagauz and their movement to South-eastern Europe a millennium ago. At the same time, the absence of historical evidence about Gagauz history until the 19th century has embedded into Gagauz consciousness the mythologized and romanticized versions of the Turkic roots.

Kissa (2019), Dobrov (2019) and Dragoy (2019) refer to Gagauz-Turkish relations as “brotherly”, which is not surprising at least for the author. In general, Pan-Turkism, as a concept, has been promoted as the brotherhood of Turkic ethnic groups. Within the Oghuz branch, the fraternal nature of Turkey's attitude toward others has especially been more obvious, particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union. For instance, the context of Azerbaijani-Turkish relations is no more evaluated as those of two neighboring countries. This bond has been developed into a trans-national concept known as “One Nation – Two States”, a unique phenomenon in international system.

At the same time, the Gagauz do not want to feel inferior in this bilateral relationship.

We generally believe that the Turks are our brothers. If you ask anyone, [they] will say that they believe that the Turks are our brothers. Of course, we are not going to call who is the elder brother, who is the younger. It is not appropriate. In any case, we believe that we are of the same blood as the Turks. It is not even discussed. (Dragoy, 2019)

In some cases, the Gagauz, who do not want to feel inferior due to their small size and to the status of recipient of Turkish aid, may construct a myth of superiority. In such cases, the emphasis is usually put on antiquity of the Gagauz language.

*If we speak today Gagauz, our pure language, a Turk would hear and say: “**You speak like ancient Turks, like our ancestors.**”* (Dragoy, 2019) (The boldly highlighted words were said in Gagauz)

This myth was also confirmed by Dobrov (2019) and Patraman (2019), with the latter stating that it was Gagauz that was taken as the basis for contemporary Turkish during the language reform under Atatürk.

The present Turkish soft power is projected mainly in “constructions and investments” (Sirkeli, 2019) and “infrastructure projects” (Dobrov, 2019). These projects, huge and visible, are carried out by TİKA and Turkish private sector. One of Turkey`s main tools in the region, TİKA, has carried out more than 400 projects all over Moldova, including Gagauzia since 1994.

In recent years, TİKA built new housing facilities for 15 families, which had suffered from the Ceadăr-Lunga flood (275,000 euro), a playground in Vulcănești (21,000 euro), a football field in Congaz (25,000 euro), an artesian well in Congaz (41,500 euro), reconstructed a kindergarten in Copceac (397,000 euro), equipped the Süleyman Demirel kindergarten (88,000 euro), carried out the cleaning of the riverbed of the Stratan River (appr. 150,000 euro)²⁸. The organization repaired the government building, the Ceadăr-Lunga stadium, modernized the Gagauz Radio and Television facilities and the Vulcănești hospital²⁹. Only in 2016, the total aid delivered to Gagauziya via TİKA equalled to 21 million Moldovan leu (approx. 1 million euro)³⁰. The most recent agreement between the governments of Turkey and Gagauzia stipulates the construction of a 10-million-euro stadium in Comrat³¹.

²⁸ Итоги социально-экономического развития АТО Гагаузии, 2016 (in Russian). Accessed on April 22, 2019. <https://investgagauzia.md/itogi-sots-ekon-razvitiya/>

²⁹ TİKA projects and activities in Moldova 1992-2013. Accessed on April 24, 2019. <https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/oldpublication/moldova.pdf>

³⁰ Отчет Башкана Гагаузии о проделанной работе за 2016 год (in Russian). Accessed on April 22, 2019. <http://vlah.md/index.php?newsid=1043>

³¹ Турецкие инвестиции в строительство нового стадиона в Комрате составят 10 миллионов евро (in Russian). January 11, 2019. Accessed on April 21, 2019.

Turkish businesspeople are also active in and frequently visit the region. Four Turkish fabric manufacturing factories operate in Gagauzia³². In 2016, Turkey`s Gebze industrial zone agreed in 2016 to develop a similar industrial park in the autonomy³³, while a 2-million-dollar investment was allocated for the construction of a brand-new hotel in Comrat³⁴ the next year.

The author himself witnessed the infrastructure facilities such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Retirement House, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk public library, Altındağ Youth Center which have been built by the Turks in Comrat in recent years.

Turkish projects are also appraised for the way they are implemented. Kissa (2019) and Zanet (2019) appreciate that the Turkish party does not simply provide finances. By learning the needs and demands of Gagauzia, Turkey itself designs and implements development projects. Such an approach is necessary, helpful and valuable in terms of “avoiding corruption” (Kissa, 2019; Zanet, 2019).

Turkey`s attention to Gagauzia and attempts to further emphasize the position of Gagauzia within the Turkic world is indicated by regular visits of Turkish officials: Turkish ambassadors to Moldova visit the region quite often, according to Ibrishim (2019). So do high-ranking officials from Ankara: for instance, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım and Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in May 2017³⁵. The most remarkable of such visits was realized in October 2018, when Turkey`s President Recep Tayyip

<http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=44652>

³² Рецепт властей: как выживает Гагаузия (in Russian). April 3, 2018. Accessed on April 21, 2019. <https://ru.sputnik.md/economics/20180403/18296154/gagauzia-business.html>

³³ Администрация турецкой промзоны GEBZE поможет в разработке генплана развития индустриального парка Комрата (in Russian). November 9, 2016. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=29334>

³⁴ В столице Гагаузии начато строительство отеля Chateu Komrat: турецкие инвестиции составят 2 млн долларов (in Russian). May 6, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2019. <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=32860>

³⁵ Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu accompanied Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım during his visit to Moldova (in Turkish). May 5, 2017. Accessed on April 21, 2019. http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-cavusoglunun-moldova-ziyareti_en.en.mfa

Erdoğan attended Comrat³⁶ and delivered a speech, in which he referred to the Turkic world as a 300-million-family³⁷.

Apart from social projects, Turkey actively uses cultural and educational tools. Two of several Turkish schools across Moldova are located within Gagauzia. The “high quality” of the education with more emphasis on “English and natural sciences” makes these schools quite “popular” in Gagauzia (Sirkeli, 2019). One of the schools is controlled by the Turkish government, the other by Gülen network now outlawed in Turkey.

The Comrat State University is another target of Turkish investments. The Turkish Student Center (Ibrishim, 2019) has been operating since 2009³⁸, while Turkish language courses are being regularly held at the university and Atatürk Public Library. The Turkish Language and Literature Department was launched at the university in January 2019³⁹. The university and library are actively supplied with Turkey-printed books, usually from the Yunus Emre Institute and TİKA.

The Turkish influence is transmitted also through Turkish lecturers dispatched from Turkey to work at university and gymnasia, as well as through Turkish students who usually come to learn Russian (*sic*) at the Comrat State University.

In addition, we have Turkish students at the university. They organize an environment for communication. Turkish language is becoming more active.
(Ibrishim, 2019)

Turkey wants to exert its influence by actively promoting the Gagauz language. It is, for instance, confirmed by Kissa (2019), who says that the Turks usually advice the Gagauz to speak their mother tongue. He further narrates a personal story:

³⁶ Moldova'da Başkan Erdoğan'a coşkulu karşılama (in Turkish). October 18, 2018. Accessed on April 21, 2019. <https://www.sabah.com.tr/galeri/dunya/moldovada-baskan-erdogana-coskulu-karsilama>

³⁷ Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: 300 milyonluk büyük bir aileyiz (in Turkish). October 18, 2018. Accessed on April 21, 2019. <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/erdogan-gagavuzyada-konusuyor-3402993>

³⁸ Türk Öğrencileri Merkezi (in English, Russian, Turkish). Accessed on April 22, 2019. <https://kdu.md/en/struktura-universiteta/tsentry/turetskij-tsentr>

³⁹ Bartın Üniversitesi Gagauzya'da 'Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü' Açılmasına Destek Verdi (in Turkish). January 30, 2019. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <https://www.haberler.com/bartin-universitesi-gagauzya-da-turk-dili-ve-11692348-haberi/>

I admired what the Turkish Ambassador once said to me. I write him a[n official] letter to ask for some assistance... And he takes the paper and says to me, in Russian: “I do not understand Russian.”

“Write me in Moldovan, Gagauz or Turkish,” says he. And it is right. This is in his subconscious: “You can write in Gagauz. Maybe poorly, not so well, with some mistakes. But just write.” His words touched me. And he was right.

... Now I always try to write in Gagauz or Moldovan... But we need to get a bit away from the Russian language. We speak it, we love it [Russian]. But we still have to realize our own [language]. (Kissa, 2019)

In the Gagauz narrative, Turkey may also be personified. Süleyman Demirel, who served as Turkey’s president in 1993-2000, is still admired by the Gagauz, for his attention to Gagauzia in the 1990s. Turkish leader visited and embraced Gagauzia, provided substantial support and then mediated between Chişinău and Comrat (Sirkeli, 2019; Taushanji, 2019). This admiration was monumentalized, when Demirel’s bust was unveiled in front of the Comrat State University, in the Lane of Honor that also hosts the monuments to several prominent Gagauz. A gymnasium-kindergarten complex in Comrat is also named after Demirel. Moreover, the monument to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk has been erected beside TIKa-built public library.

This sympathy is also transcending to the current leadership. The visit of Turkey’s incumbent president Erdoğan in September 2018 boosted this respect.

We recently hosted Turkish president. He delivered a speech in the square. And people came there just to listen to him. They were not pushed. So much help has been provided [by Turkey] and our people appreciate it. (Kissa, 2019)

While suspicious attitude of the Gagauz to the Turks due to the religious difference are articulated in academic and analytical pieces, the author did not feel it during his field trip. In the interviews, the religious theme was mentioned several times. Some interlocutors are quite happy that they are “not forced to convert to Islam” (Kissa, 2019; Manjul, 2019), that the Turks “do not build mosques” in Gagauzia (Manjul, 2019) and even invite the Gagauz to preserve what makes them Gagauz:

*I really like what Erdoğan said in his speech: “**Preserve your language and religion**”. He did not say: “**Become Muslim. Speak Turkish.**” He clearly put it: “**Preserve your language and religion**”. (Zanet, 2019) (The boldly highlighted words were said in Turkish)*

Turkey also attempts to promote its soft power through mass media. The most obvious policy is the re-broadcasting of Turkish TV channels on Gagauz Radio and Television. However, these attempts have not worked, according to Sirkeli (2019), who says that nobody watches Turkish TV channels. However, Ibrishim (2019) claims that the latter may have an audience, especially among the Gagauz, who have been to Turkey.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that, Turkey, too, is a key destination for Gagauz emigrants, especially female migrant workers. These migrants not only become part of the Turkic world, but also enrich Gagauz language and culture with Turkish elements.

[T]hose who have been there [in Turkey] as migrants, bring the language when they return. That is, the Gagauz language is enriched with elements of Turkish, which are entered into circulation. These are simple people who use Turkish words in everyday life. They start watching Turkish channels. They bring some elements of Turkish culture. (Ibrishim, 2019)

At the same time, the arrival of Turkish elements in Gagauz landscape may become a source of concern, to some extent. The pure Gagauz words are replaced by their Turkish alternatives. As a result, the leadership and average citizens Turkify both oral and written Gagauz. Thus, Zanet (2019) concludes that the penetration of the Turkish vocabulary and pronunciation into Gagauz additionally contributes to the degradation of the latter. But this is not Turkey's policy, as it is happening mostly at vernacular level.

Other representatives of the Gagauz intelligentsia cherish serious expectations from Turkey, whose social and cultural projects do not seem satisfactory. Referring to the current state of the Gagauz language, Dobrov (2019) calls on for more efforts from Turkey for salvation of his mother tongue.

Neither previous presidents, including Demirel nor the current President Erdoğan, understands our tragedy. And the tragedy is the disappearance of [our] language. They [the Turks] are ready to invest huge money in the construction of

buildings. No penny has been invested in the development of the [Gagauz] language. (Dobrov, 2019)

Patraman (2019) also thinks that the Gagauz language should be saved by Turkey. Because by losing their mother tongue, the Gagauz will lose their Turkic ethnicity and Turkey will lose its influence. This idea points out to how ethnicity and language may correlate in this part of the world and shows how identity may be used for practical gain:

Why there is no proposal on investment in the language issue is not clear for me. I do not think that the Republic of Turkey would refuse. After all, the Turkish influence is present here because we are a Turkic people. If we cease to be a Turkic people and cease to speak the mother tongue, then what kind of Turkish influence, in principle, can we talk about? That is, the influence would also be lost. (Patraman, 2019)

In case Gagauz cannot be saved, a radical solution offers to introduce Turkish in Gagauzia. Dobrov (2019) and Dragoy (2019) reckon that Turkish, as a kin Oghuz language, can save Turkicness of the Gagauz if intensively taught within the autonomy.

Dragoy (2019) also wants more cooperation from the Turkish party. He proposes a practical advice: more scholarships should be allocated from Turkey to attract more students to go to Turkey and then to return to the homeland. This policy would not only gain Gagauzia skilled human resources but also increase pro-Turkish sentiments here.

Turkey is also seen as a protector against the independence of Moldova.

We see them [the Turks] as protectors. If someone encroaches the independence of the Republic of Moldova... Therefore, in the Turks, we have always been looking for and will continue to look for a partner and a defender. (Dragoy, 2019)

To summarize the findings of the fieldwork, the relevant template is filled in as follows at the end of this sub-chapter (see *Table 5*).

Table 5. Pan-Turkism in Gagauzia

Role	Opportunity Fraternity (ethno-linguistic affiliation and kinship)
	Threat Language (Turkish contributes to the demise of Gagauz) Religion (this threat is becoming weaker)
Channels of influence	Development aid and investment (infrastructure construction, substantial help, less corruption) Language Education and culture (Turkish schools, language courses, books, students and lecturers) Migrants Frequent visits of Turkish officials (president, prime minister, ambassador) Sympathy toward Turkish leaders
Local expectations	Protection of Turkicness (revival of the Gagauz language, intensive Turkish classes) Education Protection of the autonomy

5.4. Gagauzia and EU normative power

For some time, the EU, as an external normative power (Toal's model) is involved in Gagauzia indirectly, mainly through the former's engagement with Moldova, a nationalizing parent state. As already stated, the EU (institutions, NGOs and individual states) decided to contact with Gagauzia in a straight manner, especially in the aftermath of the 2014 referendum, in order to alter the negative attitude in the region towards the

EU. Thus, the EU narrative is not only the recent phenomenon, but also a changing one in the Gagauz context.

“If we met about 10 years ago, I would naturally say that a greater percentage” was pro-Russian, started Dragoy (2019) when answering the author`s question.

...After the European Union opened the borders and we began to travel more (tourism, leisure, work), people`s thoughts also started to change. And the percentage, 100%, that was once with Russia today... is no more. But the eastern vector is still dominating. (Dragoy, 2019)

The Gagauz imagination of the EU (and the Western world in general) is usually negative, which was mainly constructed prior to the 2014 referendum. Sirkeli (2019) finds two major sources of this attitude. He firstly blames the Moldovan side for not clearly explaining to the masses, including the Gagauz the essence of the European integration.

Here our Moldovan leadership is responsible. Because in 2009 the Moldovan authorities and politicians should have spoken of how the process really is, instead of speaking about European integration. In other words, the Association Agreement with the European Union says nothing about the prospects for membership and that Moldova will join the European Union. It is simply an association agreement, which stipulates that Moldova should bring some spheres to certain standards. Yet, everyone was chanting that we would soon enter the European Union. And all the politicians claimed that we would become a full EU member by 2020-2025. (Sirkeli, 2019)

All the speculations in Chişinău around European integration seem to damage not only the process itself, but also the EU`s image in the eyes of the Gagauz. Thus, as Sirkeli (2019) explains, the phrase ‘European integration’ has become very invective, just as the term ‘democracy’ was discredited in the post-Soviet space in early 1990s.

The negative EU image has also been constructed by Russian propaganda and (pro-Russian) politicians, while pro-Russian population of Gagauzia easily absorb these ideas (Sirkeli 2019). The Russian propaganda machine that creates myths on the EU has been influential here, associating the EU with the gay movement:

Having seen it [the pro-EU movement of Moldova], the Russians said: "Guys, you want European integration and membership? We will now explain to your citizens what it means." Thus, they started narrating that Europe was full of gays and that they would flow into Gagauzia... That your men would wear skirts and put on earrings, that your children would be taken away from you and given to gay families for upbringing. That you would be forbidden to keep pets and to slaughter animals at home because of some standards. All these horror stories were quickly cultivated. (Sirkeli, 2019)

As seen, the major focus of this mythmaking touched on what could threaten the traditional lifestyle of the Gagauz.

The Gagauz believe that Europe is an evil, from which it is necessary to run away. They were convinced of it by those politicians who won the last few elections, either parliamentary or local. Because this is a profitable trick: "There are gays, we do not want to go there". (Jekova, 2019)

However, the 2014 referendum that produced the anti-European and pro-Russian output brought some tangible results, too. The European political institutions and academic circles started paying more attention to this region. More and more scholarly pieces and analytical articles appeared, while the European organizations initiated several projects which directly aimed at Gagauzia. Previously, the European projects would reach (or not reach) Gagauzia via Chişinău.

The anti-European hysteria which peaked on the eve of the referendum was replaced with opened borders and established contacts. With the unlocking of the borders between the EU and Moldova after the introduction of visa-free regime, the attitude towards Europe started changing (Sirkeli, 2019; Kissa, 2019; Dobrov, 2019; Ibrishim, 2019).

The direct experience of higher living standards in the West, to which "we, the Gagauz, should strive for" (Dobrov, 2019) positively influence the Gagauz world outlook. Therefore, Sirkeli (2019) considers that it is necessary to focus on the process of the European integration rather than EU membership. More actions on bringing Moldova to European standards and less talk about the EU membership would be a better policy for Europeanizing Moldova, including Gagauzia:

As for the EU, firstly, there is no need to tell people fairy tales. We can forget about EU membership for 50 years. The EU does not want this in the first place. And we are not ready for this. Thus, to say that Moldova will enter the EU is far from reality. These questions, in my opinion, should not be discussed at all.

Yes, we are on the path of European integration in the sense that we are complying with the terms of the association agreement and conducting reforms.

If you ask a person, “Do you want to enter the European Union?”, they will certainly answer “no”. If you ask them “Do you want a standard of living like in Europe?”, they will say “yes”. If you ask them “Do you want justice or good roads?”, they will say “yes”. Just like in Europe. Thus, you do not need to ask them about Euro-integration with the present conditions. We need economic development, normal judicial system, anti-corruption reforms. Rather than speaking of Euro-integration, you will do what is part of Euro-integration. People themselves will understand everything perfectly. (Sirkeli, 2019)

The EU investments are accepted in Gagauzia without any problems as infrastructure projects are funded by the Europeans (Sirkeli, 2019; Dragoy, 2019). Direct European projects and investments help to change the narratives, says Kissa (2019), bringing as an example his own native settlement:

Europe began to implement projects in Gagauzia directly through our government. The referendum gave impetus to their projects, so they began allocating money here. For example, in my village, the locals already speak very well about Europe as they know who built the roads and the water system, where the money came from. Therefore, narrative is changing to positive. (Kissa, 2019)

The big scope of European projects and grants, which are accepted by the Gagauz authorities with a pleasure, is not fully advertised in Gagauzia, according to Jekova (2019), in order to downplay the European influence and maintain pro-Russian loyalty.

Indeed, both the EU and its structures have been paying more attention to the post-referendum Gagauzia. Several large-scale projects funded by the EU have been implemented in the region:

The 2016-2018 SARD (Support for agriculture and rural development in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia) Programme had a budget of 6.5 million euro provided by the European Union. Designed to support local entrepreneurship and development of the agro-food sector, the programme was also supposed to boost cooperation among the central and local authorities and regional organizations in order to uphold regional and national social-economic development⁴⁰. Another EU-funded project is GAMCON, which functioned in 2017-2019 through a system of trainings and educational visits. The project financed over 20 ideas in Gagauzia, including the opening of a photo studio, a music studio, a cinema hall, recreation areas, schools of robotics. The overall budget was 850,000 euro⁴¹, with grants ranging between 5,000 euro and 10,000 euro for each project⁴². A third programme with a total budget 600,000 euro supports civil society organizations in Gagauzia between 2017-2019⁴³. In March 2018, a 3-million-euro EU program on support of local authorities was officially launched⁴⁴.

The EU normative power can also be looked into through a prism of the individual activities of the EU member-states.

Separate activities of EU countries and non-governmental organizations should also be considered. For instance, Sweden supports the activities of CMI, a Finnish-based organization, which facilitates dialogue and cooperation between the Parliament of Moldova and the authorities of Gagauzia⁴⁵. Dozens of kindergartens in Gagauzia were

⁴⁰ Support for agriculture and rural development in ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia. Accessed on April 22, 2019. http://sard.md/en/?page_id=1040

⁴¹ В Гагаузии стартовал молодежный проект GAMCON с бюджетом в 850 тысяч евро (in Russian). April 7, 2019. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=32309>

⁴² Проект GAMCON объявляет конкурс на финансирование гражданских инициатив (in Russian). October 16, 2017. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=36082>

⁴³ Strengthening civil society in ATU Gagauzia. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <https://www.eu4moldova.md/en/content/strengthening-civil-society-atu-gagauzia>

⁴⁴ Given the official start of the project "Support to local authorities in Gagauzia". March 28, 2018. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <https://investgagauzia.md/en/page/2/>

⁴⁵ Gagauzia dialogue 2015–2018: Contributing to the effective functioning of the Gagauzia Autonomy within the Republic of Moldova. Accessed on April 23, 2014. <http://cmi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/GagauziaParliamentaryDialogueEnglish.pdf>

repaired within the frames of Romania`s 20-million-euro grant for Moldova⁴⁶, while Germany has donated state-of-the-art devices for the Gagauz police⁴⁷.

In this context, one of the most remarkable but least mentioned nuances is passportization led by Romania and Bulgaria. This policy enables the European Union to expand into Moldova not territorially but by turning Moldovans into EU citizens. While a big number of Moldovans have acquired Romanians passports⁴⁸, thousands of the Gagauz have allegedly become Bulgarian citizens. (Although available also for Romanian citizenship, some Gagauz opt not to apply for it perhaps due to the long-time negative attitude towards Romania.) Noted only by Sirkeli (2019), the naturalization of the Gagauz by Bulgaria is an interesting phenomenon, which should be treated as a separate study. Yet, the author faced the lack of information in this field. Nor is there any figure on how many Gagauz have been naturalized so far. Official news dating back to 2015 presents an expert view that concluded that the Gagauz were Bulgarians of origin and recommended the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice to treat the Gagauz equally with other Bulgarians in their citizenship applications⁴⁹.

Yet, the major obstacle, which has transcended up to date is the LGBT rights. It is one of the biggest aspects that alienates the European Union. The attempts of the West to buy the Gagauz with several millions have not succeeded and will not succeed, claims Dobrov (2019), who is sure that “European super-freedom”, including gay movement does not allow the Gagauz to relax and move westward.

As a result, the following table is generated in this sub-chapter: the main categories are summarized for visual understanding of the EU normative power in Gagauz narrative (see *Table 6*).

⁴⁶ Улучшенные детские сады для детей из сел Молдовы (in Russian). April 14, 2015. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <https://www.kp.md/daily/26366/3247993/>

⁴⁷ Посольство Германии предоставило полиции Гагаузии мобильный передвижной центр (in Russian). June 18, 2018. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <http://nokta.md/reportage/посольство-германии-предоставило-по/>

⁴⁸ Around 1 million Moldovans acquire Romanian citizenship in past years. March 27, 2018. Accessed on May 10, 2019. <https://en.publika.md/around-1-million-moldovans-acquire-romanian-citizenship-in-past-years-2647124.html>

⁴⁹ Според научно становище на Консултативния съвет към ДАБЧ: Гагаузите са българи по произход и молбите им за гражданство следва да се третираят равнопоставено с тези на останалите българи (in Bulgarian). September 9, 2015. Accessed on April 22, 2019. <http://www.justice.government.bg/117/7449/>

Table 6. EU normative power in Gagauzia

Role	Opportunity Higher standards of development
	Threat LGBT values (constructed by Russia) Corruption and discrediting of the EU (constructed by Moldova)
Channels of influence	Open borders (direct experience, contacts) EU projects (direct to Gagauzia) Reforms Passportization (direct experience, contacts)
Local expectations	Higher standards of development

5.5. Gagauzia and Moldova

Gagauzia's regional identity and the way how it is shaped will definitely impact the situation of Moldova, the nationalizing state in Toal's model. As a former part of a bigger entity, Moldova herself hesitates between the metropolitan state and external normative power and must also cope with its uneasy national minority.

How the parent state is seen to the Gagauz is also controversial and should be scrutinized as a distinct research. Moldova is certainly constructed as Other for the Gagauz Self and the relationship with Moldova is eyed through the prism of several factors. Firstly, the fact that Gagauzia has become part of Moldova is accepted as a result of historical developments, at least neutrally, if not negatively.

And no matter how much we want to live in Russia, it will not work either. It so happened historically that this territory is currently called the Republic of Moldova and Gagauzia is its integral part. (Patraman, 2019)

This position is supplemented by Manjul (2019), who adds that:

One must understand that there is now a Republic of Moldova. The Republic of Moldova also contains the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia. How it behaves, where it goes, which course it will take and what happens within Moldova is a completely different story. But we are a part of the Republic of Moldova. I find it difficult to answer whether it is good or bad. (Manjul, 2019)

The Gagauz-Moldovan relationship is heavily shaped by Romanophobia, which has already been portrayed and explained. Hence, a hypothetical Romanian-Moldovan unification, whether it is real or imagined and whether is it on or off the agenda, haunts the Gagauz narrative and behavior. The West is also sometimes associated with Romania, while Russia and to some extent Turkey are seen protectors for the Gagauz.

In Moldova, some parasitic politicians have been saying for more than 20 years that Moldova needs to reunite with Romania. But the Gagauz suffer and make their choice because of it: we do not want to be with Romania, we have to be with Russia. These fears, which were invented and inserted into people`s heads like chips by politicians. They [those politicians] construct this danger that we can in no way go to Europe. (Manjul, 2019)

What the author himself found very interesting that Moldovan statehood is not only constructed as Other, but in some cases even internalized: in this context, Moldovans (both politicians and population) are seen as Romanian Other, while Moldova is treated as a state of the Gagauz. This argument can be supported by the fact that Moldova`s unification with Romania has indeed become impossible so far partly due to the Gagauz resistance and Transnistrian problem.

If their [Moldovan] leaders take them [Moldovans] to Romania tomorrow, they will quietly go there and never rebel against it... [B]ut whenever a wave of unionism happens, all the Gagauz, regardless of their views, become the patriots of Moldova. We do not want Moldova to join somewhere...

In general, Moldova is fortunate that there are the Gagauz here. Without the Gagauz, they would have already been in Romania. Whether it would be better or worse is another question. We do not know. But there would have not been an

*independent Moldova. It would have been incorporated 25 years ago. All presidents, both the former ones and the incumbent Dodon, accept that the Gagauz are more **statists** [gosudarstvenniki] than the Moldovans themselves.* (Dobrov, 2019) (Bold typeface added)

As seen, the reality of the “other” Other of Romania complicates the picture further. Moldova is the Other for the Gagauz in general; but if placed alongside Romania, or when the topic of Romanian unification comes up, then Moldova quickly becomes part of the Self juxtaposed with Romania. In other words, Self and Other are always relative in this region. This narrative is reflected in plural nuances, including the Moldovan vs. Romanian language controversy, with most of my interlocutors, copying the general trend in Gagauzia, would prefer the notion ‘Moldovan language’ than ‘Romanian’.

It is no surprise that, the Gagauz electorate which may actually seem small and insignificant, is intensively embraced by Moldova’s anti-unionist political figures and parties, most notably by the current president, pro-Russian Igor Dodon, who visits Gagauzia frequently and with a great pleasure and seems to enjoy sympathy here.

Despite this internalization of the Moldovan state, the Gagauz generally refer to the 1994 Autonomy Law that legitimately reserves their right for external self-determination and looks as a guarantee against the antagonistic Romanian-Moldovan unification. The 2014 referendum did also echo and reinforce this legal clause.

Actually, it was the question that the Gagauz raised in the referendum. In case of loss of independence or sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova, Gagauzia reserves the right... to say goodbye. (Dobrov, 2019)

While the self-determination paragraph stemmed from the necessity of political realities in the mid-1990s to keep the Gagauz out of Romania if Moldova decided to join its western neighbor. In the 2010s, the paragraph was also interpreted in terms of Moldova’s EU aspirations. Partial loss of Moldova’s sovereignty in case of EU membership, this item can be brought into agenda again.

To a follow-up question, “what would Gagauzia do, should Moldova go westward?”, Sirkeli (2019) explains that Gagauzia would also proceed in this direction by inertia as

the autonomy does not possess resources to resist. Perhaps an external support might change the balance and provide the lacking resources.

Of course. Gagauzia has no other way out. It all depends on how the Russians will counter-act. If they start a strong propaganda... but what's the difference to the Gagauz? They will go anywhere... Everything depends on the support from outside. But then again... There is no need to take sharp steps. People would certainly resist the unification with Romania. (Sirkeli, 2019)

As understood, Gagauz narrative of Moldova is not straightforward; by mirroring historical experience and present realities, the Gagauz may either detach themselves from or attach themselves to Moldova, depending on the Romanian Other context. Although the Gagauz may have a say in and occasionally shape Moldova's domestic and foreign policy, they allegedly do not own power for bigger influence.

5.6. Gagauzia's geopolitical affiliation

The location of the Gagauz at the border of three geopolitical civilizations shape their narratives on identity and regional affiliation.

According to Sirkeli (2019) and Jekova (2019), the majority of the Gagauz would associate themselves with the Russian world.

Gagauzia is not a part of Romanian, European or Turkic world. It is rather a post-Soviet, Eurasian and pro-Russian entity. The Gagauz feel part of the Russian world, Russian culture. And the referendum of 2014 was mostly about it. 90% were in favor of the Eurasian Union. (Sirkeli, 2019)

Dobrov (2019) goes even further and alerts that Gagauzia is already Russian.

I say to the Turks: "What are you doing? Why are you erecting these huge buildings for the Russian Gagauz? You are building them pro bono for Russia, for a Russian Gagauzia." (Dobrov, 2019)

The other point of view promotes the idea that the Gagauz rather belong to the Turkic world. Saying this, Taushanji (2019) brings attention to the unique position of the Gagauz within the Turkic realm:

We will stay as a part of the Turkic world. We are Turks, Orthodox. Uniqueness. An exception. We are the only people who have an exclusive destiny... We must preserve this identity and fight for it. (Taushanji, 2019)

Jekova (2019) asserts that being Turkic is a great asset for the Gagauz, but this identity is not developed by pro-Russian politicians:

I consider that this is a great asset for us. That we are not a small Gagauz people, but a part of the Turkic world. I think that politicians do not want to use this card, because, in general, they know little about what the Turkic world means. And it is a shame. (Taushanji, 2019)

But both Taushanji (2019) and Jekova (2019), along with Patraman (2019), Dobrov (2019) and Dragoy (2019), accept the dual nature of the Gagauz: that this small community is partly Turkic and partly Russian. Dobrov (2019) also confirms this dual ideological affiliation but explains that it is constructed on a personal level:

Almost all adult women have been to and worked in Turkey. They feel part of the Turkic world. Almost all men have worked in Russia. They feel part of the Russian world. (Dobrov, 2019)

This dual nature, in the author`s opinion, was best described by Taushanji (2019):

Russia is our father, Turkey our mother. We suck [milk of] our mother and obey our father. (Taushanji, 2019)

With the EU`s entering the Gagauz scene, the issue of ideological and regional affiliation is becoming more intricate. As Sirkeli (2019) explains, such affiliation should and will be constructed by actions rather than through narratives. The improvement of life standards, economic development and reforms can build a positive European narrative and bring Gagauzia closer to the West.

In the opinion of Jekova (2019), the question of Gagauzia`s affiliation is constructed by politicians and becomes sharper in the eve of and during elections. Thus, different vectors of foreign policy and of development are contradicted as part of election campaigns and for political gains.

6. Conclusion

This thesis aims to explore how the Gagauz elite constructs the autonomy's regional identity *vis-à-vis* external geopolitical ideologies. The reflection of the influence and competition of three geopolitical ideologies, Russian world, Pan-Turkism and EU normative power, in Gagauzia is examined through analysis of elitist narrative. Analysing what components constitute contemporary Gagauz regional identity, how each geopolitical ideology is constructed (whether as an advantage or threat), which channels of influence each has, what local expectations tell may indirectly reveal regional / geopolitical / ideological affiliation of the present political, intellectual and cultural elite in Gagauzia. How this geopolitical struggle may also affect Moldova, Gagauzia's parent state, is also reviewed in the research.

As a small self-governing entity, which is by no means wealthy, Gagauzia seeks outside support and money, mainly from Russia, Turkey and the European Union. This way, the autonomy has long been a recipient of soft power emanated by the core entities of the studied geopolitical ideologies.

The Russian influence in Gagauzia is strong and obvious, based on the historically positive Russian image in the eyes of the Gagauz. This friendship has further been cemented by shared legacy (Soviet nostalgia) in the region. Heavily Russified during the Soviet time, many Gagauz have, thus, been brought up pro-Russian. The current dominant status of Russian in all spheres of life, including education, further fosters Russianness in the region. Therefore, the Gagauz are easy target for Russian mass and social media. Yet, as many interviewees admit that the Gagauz-Russian relations have been mostly a one-sided road, as less than expected attention and aid have come from Russia so far.

Turkey, the flagship of Pan-Turkic ideology, has undertaken serious steps to gain a foothold in the region, based on a common ethno-linguistic background. Since the 1990s, Turkish party has invested a great deal in Gagauzia: therefore, Turkish soft power is based on developmental aid and investments (mainly infrastructure construction), as well as on educational and cultural initiatives. Frequent visits by Turkish officials also underline Turkey's serious interest in Gagauzia. The local expectations from Turkey is related mainly to the revival of the fading Gagauz language.

Gagauzia's pre-2014 extremely negative picture of the European Union, has been changing recently, as several interlocutors claim. The EU also enters the region with its projects and open borders, as well as policies of individual states (such as citizenship): these efforts, especially growing direct European experience in Gagauzia and multi-million developmental programmes funded by the EU, stimulate a more positive image of the latter in the autonomy. Although the EU is associated with higher level of development and better life standards, some negativity in the local narrative still remains due to collision between Gagauz traditional lifestyle and EU-promoted gay rights.

To summarize, we can conclude that in Gagauzia:

- Russian influence is inertially maintained by the dominance of the Russian language and Soviet nostalgia;
- Active in infrastructure building and culture, Turkey emphasizes ethno-linguistic brotherhood;
- The EU gradually enters Gagauzia indirectly (via Moldova) and directly (developmental projects).

Transnational labor also contributes to the construction of the regional identity: numerous Gagauz migrant workers may affiliate themselves with and be subject to the influence of the studied powers (Russia, Turkey, the EU) and bring back to Gagauzia the elements from those powers: incorporated into Gagauz identity on a personal level, these elements add complexity to a larger compound of Gagauz narrative.

The regional / geopolitical / ideological affiliation of Gagauzia currently has a dual nature: Russian and Turkic, with the former allegedly weighing a little more. With the advance of the EU into Gagauzia, the affiliation issue seems to become more complicated. Thus, the autonomy is forced to take into account geopolitical ambitions of each of these external actors. While the sentiments articulated during the elite interviews point to attempts to construct/preserve a distinct identity, the elite's narratives generalize how the Gagauz may share with Russia language and historical connections by belonging to Russian-language information space and glorifying the Soviet era, feel part of the bigger Turkic world by mythologizing their ancient roots and embracing Turkey's infrastructure projects, and positize the EU image and accept the EU's advance into the region by eagerly receiving financial support and various programmes from the European Union.

Gagauzia's status as an integral, yet autonomous province of Moldova may present its own unique set of problems. Since the autonomy was formalized in the mid-1990s, Gagauzia has been maintaining uneasy relations with Chişinău, especially in the context of the devolution of competencies, foreign policy priorities and historical Romanophobia in Gagauz narrative. At the same time, the region does not possess ample political and economic power to be able to shape the policies of the Republic of Moldova. Neither does it have any resources to secede and become an independent state without an outside interference. Therefore, from time to time Gagauz political forces may either play the self-determination card, be the main supporters of the Moldovan statehood or see Russia and Turkey as protectors against possible Moldovan-Romanian unification.

This study generated original data based on the narratives of the local elite from a small and understudied region. Nevertheless, this analysis adds only a small puzzle into a larger Gagauz mosaic, which is treated as a single case due to the peculiar nature and conditions of the area. As Gagauzia's outsized geopolitical importance will remain for the next few years, further research may facilitate a better understanding of the region, which sits at the crossroads of civilizations, Russian world, Pan-Turkism and EU normative power, and of the construction of Gagauz regional identity narratives *vis-à-vis* these geopolitical ideologies.

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Appendix 1. List of interviewees

Mihail Sirkeli (Civil society activist, journalist, director of a local non-governmental organization). February 5, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Ludmila Ibrishim (Lecturer, Dean of the Faculty of National Culture at Comrat State University). February 6, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Todur Zanet (Journalist, folklorist and poet. Editor-in-chief of the first and only Gagauz-language newspaper). February 7, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Ivan Patraman (Theater and film actor. Director and producer of the first Gagauz-language film). February 10, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Konstantin Taushanji (Economist, Dean of Comrat State University, national movement activist, ex-mayor of Comrat). February 12, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Ekaterina Jekova (Journalist, ex-chair of Gagauz Radio and Television, Member of *Halk Topluşu*, the regional parliament). February 13, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Vladimir Kissa (Chairman of *Halk Topluşu*, the regional parliament). February 14, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Leonid Dobrov (Civil society activist, national movement activist, Soviet-time dissenter, ex-mayor of Comrat). February 16, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Vitali Dragoy (Doctor, Deputy Director of the National Prehospital Emergency Center, Member of *Halk Topluşu*, the regional parliament). February 16, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Vitali Manjul (Singer, composer and painter). February 17, 2019. Comrat, Gagauzia

Appendix 2. Interview questions (originally in Russian)

1. What is the current situation with the Gagauz language and culture? How much does territorial autonomy support them and help them to survive?

(Какова нынешняя ситуация с гагаузским языком и культурой? Насколько территориальная автономия поддерживает их и помогает им выживать?)

2. How do the Gagauz feel the Russian influence? How do they evaluate it (as a threat or advantage)?

(Насколько гагаузы чувствуют российское влияние? Как они это оценивают (как угрозу или преимущество?)

3. How much have Turkey and Turkish language been influencing Gagauzia? How does Turkish soft power reflect in Gagauzia (construction? Media?)

(Насколько Турция и турецкий язык влияют на Гагаузию? Как в Гагаузии отражается турецкая мягкая сила (строительство? СМИ?)

4. Moldova has signed an agreement with the EU and openly looks to the West. How do Gagauz perceive it? What is their imagination of the EU?

(Молдова подписала соглашение с ЕС и открыто смотрит на Запад. Как гагаузы воспринимают это? Какие у них представления о ЕС?)

5. How do Gagauz perceive their regional affiliation? As part of Moldova? Romanian space? West? Russian world? Post-Soviet space? Eurasian world? Or the Turkic world?

(Как гагаузы воспринимают свою региональную принадлежность? Как часть Молдовы? Румынского пространства? Запада? Русского мира? Пост-советского prostranstva? Евразийского мира? Или тюркского мира?)

Appendix 3. Map of Moldova



(Source: Centre for Eastern Studies⁵⁰)

⁵⁰ Gagauzia: growing separatism in Moldova? March 10, 2014. Accessed on March 10, 2019.
<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-03-10/gagauzia-growing-separatism-moldova>